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Policing Privilege and Disciplining Bodies: Victoria C. Woodhull, Anthony Comstock, and the Platform for Social Engineering

Elisa Perez-Selsky

Introduction

On May 10, 1872, Victoria C. Woodhull became the first female candidate for the Presidency of the United States. A mere two years after becoming the first woman to open a brokerage firm on Wall Street, Victoria Woodhull established herself as a force to be reckoned with, advocating on behalf of abolition, women's suffrage, and a slew of other liberal agendas. That same year, Anthony Comstock, a man devoted to preserving the legacy of Victorian morality, arranged for Woodhull's arrest on charges of obscenity following her publication of an article regarding an adulterous affair between Elizabeth Tilton and a Protestant minister. Anthony Comstock's tireless crusade against obscenity would continue into 1873, when his influence and political pull would result in the enactment of the Comstock Act, which made it illegal to proliferate information "for the prevention of conception, or for causing unlawful abortion," through the mail.^[1] Comstock would then found the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, continuing his work as a self-appointed custodian for the morality of the public in New York and, ideally, in the larger United States.

With the rise of Comstock's popularity in the religious and upper class circles of New York also came the growing prominence among activists and progressives of his ideological foe, Victoria Woodhull. In addition to being a fiery and progressive pioneer for women's suffrage and economic freedom, Woodhull held another conviction central to her identity as an activist of the Gilded Age. "The condition of the parents at the time of the conception is a matter of prime importance, since the life principle with which the new organism is to begin its growth should be of the highest order," Woodhull stated, revealing her belief in a newfound science supported by many of her contemporaneous progressives: the science of eugenics.^[2] As defined by Francis Galton, one of her contemporaries as well as a pioneer of this science, "eugenics is the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage."^[3] Advocates of eugenics desired to regulate the reproductive habits of certain groups of people, mainly minorities, in order to improve the genetic makeup of new humans. Woodhull was a strong proponent of eugenics, believing that each "human failure adds a considerable item to the burden, already large, put upon the healthy useful citizens," and advocating for "the care and culture of offspring by new and better methods."^[4] For Woodhull, the targets of such eugenic thought were often the poor and the mentally and physically disabled, whose possible reproductive habits were deemed harmful, or even dangerous, as they threatened the well-being of the greater society.

Both Victoria C. Woodhull and Anthony Comstock were prominent social and political figures whose rhetoric dominated social discourse before the turn of the century. However, while Woodhull and Comstock were seemingly worlds apart in their political orientation, there was an important common thread between them that reveals much about both progressive and conservative discourse in the

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United States. While Victoria Woodhull was extremely liberal compared to many of her political peers, her support and advocacy for eugenics aligned her in a nuanced but significant way with social purists such as Anthony Comstock. With Anthony Comstock attempting to limit public access to "obscene" materials, and with Victoria Woodhull promoting mandatory birth control among the poor and other "unfit" members of society, both, somewhat unknowingly, became advocates of a social engineering platform aimed at preserving privilege, maintaining innocence, and censoring human bodies and actions. This paper seeks to explore this significant ideological relationship as it relates to Gilded Age and contemporary perpetuations of white, upper class, able-bodied privilege.

Biographies and Background

Despite this important similarity, Comstock and Woodhull were indeed very different figures with very different backgrounds. Woodhull was born in 1838 in Homer, Ohio, as the seventh child of a conman for a father and a religious zealot for a mother. She originally gained notoriety as a Spiritualist magnetic healer along with her sister, Tennessee C. Claflin. They later used this notoriety to help them set up the first firm run by women on the New York Stock Exchange. They also established a weekly newspaper publication by the name of *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, in which issues such as Marxism, free-love, spiritualism, and suffrage often made the headlines.^[5] Woodhull also took part in the early women's suffrage movement, having quietly attended the Washington convention of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony's National Woman Suffrage Association. It was here that she first heard the argument that the Constitution already granted women the right to vote, and thus the proposed 16th Amendment was unnecessary.^[6] Woodhull quickly made this argument her own, boldly declaring that women "are entitled to the inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," and thus in the right to pursue happiness also have a right to have "a voice in that government to which I am accountable."^[7]

It was not just advocacy for suffrage, however, that made Woodhull such a controversial and divisive figure. In 1871, rumors and scandal began to circulate around her, especially regarding the rather unusual domestic setup of her home on Murray Hill in New York City. She lived there with her sister, her second husband Colonel James Harvey Blood, her parents, her first (alcoholic) husband Dr. Channing Woodhull, anarchist and author Stephen Pearl Andrews, and a horde of children.^[8] The sensationalized media coverage surrounding such an odd arrangement finally compelled Woodhull to declare herself a Free Lover:

Yes, I am a Free Lover. I have an inalienable, constitutional and natural right to love whom I may, to love as long or as short a period as I can; to change that love every day if I please, and with that right neither you nor any law you can frame have any right to interfere.^[9]

Woodhull defied the stigma of her lifestyle, a stigma perpetuated by the press. She even went so far as to declare marriages of convenience as "legalized prostitution," and that marriages without real love should not exist at all.^[10] Woodhull's rather unconventional conviction regarding her beliefs quickly set her apart as a prominent figure in New York politics and the social sphere.

Woodhull's fame attracted the disapproving glower of Anthony Comstock, whose austere Victorian ideals of sexual restraint would come into direct conflict with Woodhull's radical notions of sexual freedom. Born on a small farm in New Canaan, he attended school intermittently before having to work as a clerk in a county store in Winnebark. Comstock eventually enlisted in the army in December 1863, only to be disgusted with the salacious lifestyles of other soldiers. It was in the army that Comstock's humble crusade for righteousness began, though hostility towards him would eventually force him to return home to Connecticut.^[11] Eventually, however, Anthony Comstock would find himself in New

York, surrounded by the erotic vice that his evangelical Christianity had so warned him against. Comstock began his righteous movement first by campaigning against saloons in the Brooklyn neighborhood, appealing to the mayor and police chief for help.^[12] He then began to focus his efforts on the banning of obscene books, the largest fight of this nature being that with publisher William Haynes. Haynes, along with his wife Mary, "continued publishing erotic books until Comstock got close."^[13] Comstock turned to the YMCA to buy the plate engravings for these books for \$650, setting the precedent for their support for his efforts for years to come.

Comstock and Woodhull even came into direct conflict with each other, mainly after a scandalous article publication in *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly* was charged with libel against Luther Challis, as it claimed that he boasted of engaging in sexual activity with young girls.^[14] After a failed attempt to indict Woodhull and her sister for this sordid report, Comstock requested that the issue of the weekly containing this story be sent to him through the mail and turned over to federal marshals so that he could arrest the sisters under the federal postal code.^[15] Woodhull and Claflin were thus arrested and arraigned by federal marshals on November 2nd, 1873 at 23rd Irving Place. Woodhull, in a histrionic attempt to elude arrest, disguised "herself as an old lady in a pearl-colored bonnet, with a veil and a black and white shawl," only to eventually throw off her disguise and commence "a tirade against the law officers."^[16] The offense, as put in the official New York Society for the Suppression of Vice Records, was for "mailing obscene papers."^[17]

Comstock had much to gain from going after Woodhull, as she was becoming a famously controversial figure in New York City by this time. He saw an opportunity to gain repute in his movement, but he was not successful in the trial. Woodhull had a very effective defense for the obscenity trial, and ultimately got off on a technicality.^[18] Such a disappointment for Comstock, however, would only continue to fuel the dispute between them, as well as catalyze his future endeavors to regulate obscenity. What can be gleaned from this dramatic interaction is that both Comstock and Woodhull had a propensity for celebrity, and their theatrical figures would cast large feuding shadows on the city of New York and the reform movement for years to come.

Historiography

Most scholarship on Anthony Comstock, the NYSSV, and Victoria C. Woodhull mainly seeks to explore the stratification between various discourses on sex in society, and for obvious reasons. Comstock and Woodhull had completely different world views, but any possible similarities they might have shared are simply not discussed in most scholarship. Even direct comparisons between the two are not that common, but by far the leading scholar on such material would be Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, specifically in her text *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America*. She argues that there were four frameworks through which American discourse on sexuality took place; these four being American vernacular sexual culture, Evangelical Christianity, a "new consciousness" linked to biological functions of the body, and a new sensibility that regarded sex as the center of life.^[19] Comstock obviously belongs in the Evangelical Christianity camp while Woodhull is argued to be one of those who saw sex as central to human existence.^[20] Such dramatic polarity defined the discourse not only in New York, but in the United States as a whole.

While one might assume that other scholarship that explores solely Comstock or Woodhull as public figures in pre-turn of the century New York would exacerbate the differences between them, it is interesting to note that when dealt with separately, scholars seem to unknowingly agree on their similarities. For example, in her text, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in*

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Victorian America, Nicola Beisel argues that efforts to suppress sexuality and obscenity were actually attempts to preserve the exclusive privilege of the upper middle class and ensure upper class reproduction.[21] Beisel explains that Comstock received much of his popularity from concerned upper and middle class parents who worried that their children would fall victim to various vices, and thus imperil that family's ability to advance in class status.[22] This motive, ensuring the quality of reproduction, is the exact same motive for the advocacy of eugenics, of which Victoria C. Woodhull took part. In Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, he argues that at the turn of the century, more attention was paid to the social significance of hereditary characteristics, especially when it came to issues of poverty.[23] This hereditarian approach to social theory often resulted in attacks on new immigrant groups in America, trade unionism, and social legislation/programs. They were blamed for lessening the quality of the racial stock and preventing the improvement and advancement of American society.[24]

In her text, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman*, Angelique Richardson explores a feminist discourse of eugenics, to which Victoria C. Woodhull subscribed, arguing that eugenics was a class-based application of new Darwinian theories. The Victorian Era was a time of competition and individualism, and thus ideas of social Darwinism and eugenics, deemed credible and of a "scientific" authority, were able to proliferate easily in such a hostile environment. Richardson examines the intersection between the early feminist idea of the New Woman and eugenics, and ultimately argues that many of these New Women subscribed to a brand of eugenic feminism that was most prominent in their works of fiction. She explores the growing concern in the late Victorian era of the growing number of urban poor, and how this concern led to widespread fear regarding the degeneration of upstanding British society.[25] Poverty was "biologized," and the poor were thought to have their own biological makeup that caused them to dwell and permanently remain in such destitution.

Eugenics was thus seen as a way to improve the reproductive stock of society, just as censorship was seen as a way to protect it. Ultimately, eugenics is not merely related to censorship, it *is* censorship. It is censorship of a human's ability to create something, in this case another human being, just as Comstock's efforts to block obscenity also censored human creations. This distinction lessens the ideological gap between these mammoth figures, and suggests that both eugenic discourse and censorship policy were tools used to execute discipline on individuals and on society as a whole. Such censorship will be interpreted in this paper as a Foucaultian disciplining of bodies, as eugenics sought to create the ultimate docility in the bodies of the poor, minorities, and the biologically unfit, and austere Victorian morality worked to discipline the bodies of the white upper class, while alienating the disenfranchised.

Foucaultian Frameworks

Though Michel Foucault's famous work discusses the birth and development of the physical prison, it has been used by many scholars to exemplify the ways in which society creates methods of discipline and punishment in order to inflict hegemony among its members. These methods have thus become more implicit, for "the body... is caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions." [26] This paper explores ideas of punishment, imprisonment, and discipline on this more implicit and figurative level, with special regard for how society disciplines bodies. Such discipline creates a docile body, which is a body that "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved." [27] Subjugation is an important aspect to such docility, as it no doubt had a role in the lives of minorities in the Gilded Age. But what is especially important to note for the purposes of this paper is

the utilitarian framework through which the body is perceived. The goal of eugenics is not only to subjugate and alienate bodies of lesser biological value, but to transform white, able-bodied and upper-class bodies into effective reproducers of a superior humanity, thus transforming bodies into tools.

To fully embrace the idea of a Foucaultian framework for this paper, the definition of a prison must also be expanded to include policies, ways of thinking, and societal bias. Racial and eugenic discourses, as well as the severity of Victorian morals, were such a prison, creating physical confines where actual policy was enacted and environmental discrimination took hold, and figurative confines where concepts of propriety controlled human sexual behavior and where perceptions of certain groups of people were changed to perceive them as "other." Subjugation of the body can thus be both "direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements" as well as "subtle, [making] use neither of weapons nor of terror and yet [remaining] of a physical order."^[28] To advocate for eugenics or a refined Victorian lifestyle was to alienate, and thereby discipline, certain groups. Bodies and actions of the white and upper-middle class were thus disciplined to adhere to strict moral structures, while bodies of the mentally unfit, non-white immigrants, economically poor, or disabled were disciplined by the perpetuation of eugenic thought, putting them at odds with the rest of society.

Gilded Age methods of disciplining and punishing can also be interpreted in the Foucaultian exercise of hierarchical observation, which "coerces by means of observation."^[29] Again, the definition of this must be expanded to encapsulate more figurative measures, beyond that of a physical Foucaultian panopticon, a prison system in which a central tower allows a watchman to observe the inmates of a surrounding prison without them being able to know whether or not they are being monitored, thereby enacting a system of self-monitoring.^[30] Societal structures emphasized by racial and classist thought coupled with the stratification of classes the fact that these structures functioned in now over-crowded cities created an environment by which others, particularly those of the dominated paradigm, could be observed by the dominators and thus regulated in their actions, thereby assuring "the automatic functioning of power."^[31]

This framework of censorship is one way to encapsulate the similarities between Anthony Comstock and Victoria C. Woodhull. The other framework is that of preserving privilege, manifested in both Comstock's and Woodhull's desire to protect the innocence of children. The reality is that the larger sentiment of preserving privilege was merely couched in the argument of protecting children, for in their censored and eugenic thought, they were not concerned for actual children, but rather for "potential offspring" and the impact of "negative eugenics" (i.e., irresponsible or "bad" reproductive choices) on families.^[32] Such a framework reveals a foible in the liberalism of early feminism because it was unable to factor in intersections of racism, classism, and ableism into the formula for oppression. It also reveals motives for the advocacy of Victorian moralism beyond that of a mere fear of sex. It suggests that such a fear was perhaps a cover for deeper, more nuanced class warfare. Foucault notes that creating docile bodies was not merely a method of "illustrating an organism," but it was also a function of creating "small-scale models of power" that could act as "political puppets."^[33] The same can be said for the advocacy of Victorian morality and the regulation of obscenity, for through these efforts, a model of power was created that worked to maintain the upper class as the sole reapers of industrial wealth.

Acknowledgement of the moral blind spots of early social activists is not an attempt to disrespect the very important progress that they made. This paper is not an attempt to make the perfect the enemy of the good. It should be noted that this author writes from the perspective of third wave feminism, which had its advent in the 1990s, and therefore of which Woodhull knew nothing about. Third wave feminism functions on the idea of intersectionality, which emphasizes the importance of the interactions between

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multiple systems of oppression or discrimination. Woodhull was an extremely important figure in her day, who in many ways set the stage for first wave feminism and inspired the suffragettes who would eventually lobby for the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Her candidacy for the Presidency of the United States, with running mate Frederick Douglass, challenged the growing fear of miscegenation, or race mixing.^[34] Her fearless entrance into the male-dominated worlds of business and politics showed that she did indeed intend to "speak for the unfranchised woman of the country."^[35] However, it is important to acknowledge the areas in which historic progressives failed. This acknowledgement is not meant to punish these figures nor to condemn everything they stood for, but to rather use them as an example for progressive movements today. It is only through the recognition of these blind spots and the identification of white, upper-class, able-bodied privilege that activists can ensure the progress of future social justice movements.

The Gilded Age Backdrop

The societal tumult of the late 19th century facilitated the ideal environment for the perpetuation of Comstock and Woodhull's radical beliefs. Both conservative and progressive ideas were embraced as solutions to the escalation in societal, political, and economic problems. The year of 1845 began a decade of exponential growth in North America. Everything from transportation to the national economy expanded in a very dramatic way, giving rise to "complex movements of peoples and [bringing] momentous changes in the lives of people involved."^[36] Industrialization was an enormous part of this change sweeping America's northern cities, as it was intrinsically tied to "science and technology, urbanization, labor, immigration, the changes in rural America, and politics and issues of public policy."^[37] The US population grew by 7 million, with a disproportionate percentage living in ever-growing and ever-expanding cities. Both Comstock and Woodhull achieved prominence in New York City, which by 1850 had grown from a small provincial port into a crowded metropolis, mostly because of foreign immigration. The momentum of foreign emigration that poured into America's cities provided a horde of problems that would plague the immigrant working poor and threaten the well-being of the upper middle class. Late nineteenth century society would come to be known as the Gilded Age, because despite sweeping economic growth, it was a gold plate that masked larger systemic issues hidden underneath.

In many ways, urbanization defined the historical narrative of pre-turn-of-the-century America, for it catalyzed the shift from an agrarian society to a heavily industrialized and urbanized one. Although the United States' rural population also grew in the Postbellum period, the rate of urban population growth was significantly greater than the rate of growth for rural residents. And though small cities were expanding, what stipulated urban growth in this period was the growth of big cities, those with a population of over 100,000.^[38] While white-collar workers and the upper class occupied the residencies of banking and financing districts or newly-found suburban neighborhoods, the working-class urban poor inhabited the infamous tenements. The expansion of these tenements and slums were "directly linked to the combined impact of industrialization and immigration, and they were frequently described as a social 'abyss.'"^[39] A typical tenement was "25 by 90 feet...stood about four to six stories tall... [and] each building was intended to house sixteen to twenty-four families."^[40] The conditions of these tenements were often dilapidated, if not downright dangerous. Urban society thus became a landscape of extremities, of "sunshine and shadow" as Matthew Hale Smith would deem the city of New York in 1868; extreme wealth and extreme poverty coexisting within the same inner city. The closeness of affluence and economic disenfranchisement worsened the acute disillusionment of the lower classes, often resulting in unrest but with no tangible outlet for progress.

The influx of city populations in the late 19th century can mostly be attributed to net migration. By the 1880s, due to American prosperity and relative political stability, 5 million immigrants came to the United States, with a greater number heralding from Southern and Eastern Europe.^[41] Between the years of 1866 and 1900, over thirteen million immigrants were recorded entering the United States.^[42] "Close to half of all immigrants lived in the Northeast," and according to the 1870 census, more than forty percent of the population in New York City was composed of immigrants.^[43] Immigrants mostly came to find work, though they would find upon arrival that such work would be found in urban and industrial occupations. This work was fairly diverse, but by and large, it was economically deficient. Immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, who transformed the previously western European migrant landscape, were met with just such deficiency, often coming into "the very bottom of American urban industrial society."^[44] Thus, most Gilded Age immigrants were left with very little capital or skills by which they could improve their standard of living.

In addition to the struggle against oppressive structural conditions, immigrants also faced social biases and racial discourses that aggravated their struggle. Anti-immigrant sentiment in the Gilded Age was fueled by a variety of issues, from criminality to religious assimilation. Many urban social problems, despite their intrinsically systemic nature, were attributed to unrestricted immigration, and thus to immigrants themselves, which prominent and respected figures like Protestant clergyman Josiah Strong vehemently opposed.^[45] Such opposition to immigration cultivated strong nativist attitudes, with the majority of anti-immigrant complaints centering on criminality and pauperism. It was widely thought that "the typical immigrant [was] a European peasant, whose horizon has been narrow, whose moral and religious training has been meager or false, and whose ideas of life are low," thus leading to an increase of "hoodlums and roughs of our cities."^[46] In addition to a fear of crime, it was largely held that "every wave of foreign immigration lessens the dry land of religious observance," with such an ebb of piety attributed to "the infidel German [and] the undevout Jew."^[47] Perhaps more worrying than even these factors, however, was the sentiment that immigration was contributing to a demoralization of the American identity. So complained the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor in 1868:

They no longer as formerly melt away, or so blend with the native stocks as to become incorporated
whom with it. So large are the aggregations of different foreign nationalities, that they no longer conform to
if our habits, opinions and manners, but, on the contrary, create for themselves distinct communities,
if almost as impervious to American sentiments and influences as are the inhabitants of Dublin or Hamburg.^[48]

The fact that immigrants were no longer assimilating to typical American cultural aesthetics was a huge sticking point for nativists, who began to believe that these groups would undermine the societal structures that had come to benefit the dominant paradigms.

The influx of poor men and women from Europe overcrowded the already teeming tenements and cellar dwellings of New York City, exacerbating the poverty in the area. As New York shippers and financiers began to dominate the American economy, local craftsmen and respectable artisans became victim to sweat trades and a casual labor market. Such sources of labor created a poverty from which many families could not pull themselves out of. While the conditions of the city, especially the slums, became further dilapidated, "pilfering, along with huckstering, begging and rag picking, became one of the poor family's chief means to make a living."^[49] Such petty crime was rampant in America's larger cities, with children being the usual thieves. However, New York city was also the center of larger crimes such as

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counterfeiters and sellers of illicit goods, made possible because of New York's easy access via ship, canal, or rail. Stolen goods passed through the city's pawnshops, and eventually surveillance of the shops became the norm. Poverty also led to the formation of gangs, who would mediate between City Hall and the poor of the city, often through violence or voter intimidation. Not only did this lead to even more violence, but it culminated in an extremely corrupt government in New York City. The police force would often accept bribes and rewards, often leading in a lack of true justice.

Stratification between groups of people existed not only on societal and cultural levels, but labor levels as well. With the advent of industrialization, the labor landscape changed drastically in the late nineteenth century. By 1870, for the first time, America became "a nation of employees," meaning laborers worked for somebody else and were dependent upon them for their livelihood. Though the standard of living improved for most American workers, these improvements were largely shared by those at the top of the hierarchy, usually native-born workers or white immigrants from England and Germany. Those who worked as unskilled laborers, usually non-whites and immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, lived "precariously close to the prospect of poverty."^[50] The conditions of work were usually deplorable, from abusive managers to high accident rates, and catalyzed recurrent protests at places of employment across the nation. While such protests were couched in the tangible issues of wages, work hours, union recognition, and working conditions, they represented a slew of macrocosmic questions that challenged "the morality of capitalist industrialization, the compatibility of political democracy and economic concentration, and the very fate of the Republic."^[51] While unrest was extremely common, laborers often shared no common goals, as they were divided along racial, religious, and gender lines. Thus labor in the Gilded Age was characterized by constant turmoil not just from a top-down power struggle, but from an internal struggle between laborers as well.

To further compound the tensions present within the close confines of the American city, American politics were also filled with rivalry and dissension. Politicians of the late nineteenth century were often intensely partisan, and there was a large philosophical gulf between Republicans and Democrats. Contrary to the current political environment, Republicans of the Gilded Age believed that "the authority and strength of the government could be used to broaden the nation's wealth," while Democrats "asserted that the role of the government should be confined and minimal."^[52] Even beyond partisanship, there were issues that divided people, whether Democrats or Republicans, the most infamous one being the issue of leaving the gold standard. The polarizing nature of many of these issues left many citizens feeling under-served by their elected officials. This fueled several third-party campaigns of the era, such as those of the Liberal Republicans, the Prohibitionists, and the Greenback Labor party. The largest and most influential third party, however, was the People's party, or the Populists, who reached prevalence in the 1890s, especially among farmers who felt particularly disenfranchised in a "world market structure with volatile prices for farm commodities."^[53]

Industrialization not only changed the working, urban, and political makeup of the United States, but its cultural disposition as well. The Gilded Age saw the advent of an American *popular* culture, which could be easily proliferated thanks to the capital provided by industrialization. Those with the money and the leisure time could afford to indulge in various venues for entertainment, including popular theater, popular music, popular reading, and sports. Most popular in the line of theater works were saloon-based variety shows, "often with off-color content, performed for a rowdy drinking male audience," of which New York City became the capital.^[54] Following the theme of entertainment with relatively little substance, popular reading was characterized by a focus on scandals, crimes, sensationalized news stories, and graphic illustrations. Such sensationalism was a popular hallmark in the popular dime novels, which often contained stories of brave cowboys, wily criminals, and savage Indians of the Wild

West. These materials would eventually become exactly the type of content that Anthony Comstock would deem morally unfit, and spend his entire career attempting to censor.

The volatility and political conflict embedded in every detail of the Gilded Age meant that "American society saw its own image in the tooth-and-claw version of natural selection," validating notions of biological competition and ruthlessness among the dominant paradigms of the time.^[55] Social Darwinism was thus able to grow strong roots in the United States, leading to the belief in a natural and biological inequality between certain groups of people. It was Herbert Spencer, infamous coiner of the "survival of the fittest" expression, whose theories the American people latched onto, for they were "admirably suited to the American scene" and reassured notions of progress.^[56] Social Darwinism facilitated a sort of number-crunching empiricism, by which anti-immigrant attacks or hateful attacks against African Americans could be justified and sustained. This allowed people and institutions to ignore socioeconomically generated inequities as the cause of various problems, and instead focus on biologism. In other words, the status quo could be preserved, and with that the privilege of those who benefited from it.

Social Darwinism also functioned as a lens through which subjugated groups could be seen. This is exemplified in Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, where he depicted images of tenement living with descriptions such as, "A tramp's nest in Ludlow street" or "in her own den."^[57] The rhetoric here draws clear parallels between poverty and primitivism, and as a result dehumanizes those of lesser socioeconomic status. In the Gilded Age, poverty and mental/physical illness were closely linked, as poverty was deemed as "either the avoidable result of individual laziness or intemperance or, if unavoidable, the empirical proof of chronic incapacity."^[58] The term "pauperism" was widely used among policy makers who had to cope with the spread of poverty. Pauperism referred to the ingrained condition of being impoverished; an inherited state of being much like a disease. Dehumanizing the subjects of Social Darwinism and biologizing poverty paved the road for the agenda to regulate the reproduction of the poor and mentally ill, thus catalyzing the advent of eugenic thought and practice.

It is important to note that Social Darwinism was a school of thought for progressives and liberals of the Gilded Age. Anthony Comstock and other Victorian conservatives were not Social Darwinists, as their religious convictions would have hindered them from buying into the scientific theory that served as its foundation. That is not to say that conservatives did not believe in the superiority of the white upper class, but most did not feel compelled to give their prejudices any kind of academic empiricism. Social Darwinism and its later manifestation of eugenics was a way for progressives to justify underlying prejudices, while still advocating for a "better" society. Social Darwinism was a defense against degeneracy, or the idea that society was beholden to a tendency to devolve into a lower, simpler, and less civilized state. Degeneration emphasized the fact that "society was a kind of body, a network in which a diseased member could infect the whole."^[59] Consequently, heredity had dominance over the environment. Though this line of thinking is incredibly flawed, one can see how such conclusions could have been logically reached, even with good intention. The problem lies in its victim-blaming nature, holding victims of an oppressive system responsible for their own misfortune.

Social Darwinism had a deep and lasting influence on the field of eugenics in America, where it "revolved around imagining the nation: what it was (now threatened) and what it might be (with and without government and medical intervention)."^[60] Eugenics gave racism, ableism and nationalism credibility by couching them in a pseudoscience rationale. Faulty scientific thought led to such conclusions that "the civilized man has also a more complex or heterogeneous nervous system that the

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uncivilized man" and the "barbarous races."^[61] Races that displayed such "flatness of the alæ of the nose [and] the divergence and forward opening of the nostrils" thus became the main victims of eugenic discourse and practices, as well as those who perhaps belonged to the dominant paradigm, but still displayed weaker characteristics (i.e., physical and mental disability)^[62] By the 1870s, theorists proposed preventing the marriages of inferior people. Eugenic thought had even embedded itself in American policy, for the 1891 Immigration Act banned "all idiots, insane persons, [and] paupers or persons likely to become a public charge," from emigrating to the U.S.^[63] And while eugenics truly came to prominence after the 1900s as an actual problem-solving policy, the seeds for such prominence were planted in the Gilded Age.

Amid all uncertainty, turbulence, and change, the stage was set for strong, radical characters to set afoot. Enter Woodhull and Comstock. People belonging to the influential upper classes longed for an individual who could protect their interests in an increasingly volatile world in which such interests were no longer guaranteed. Comstock, with his no-nonsense approach to regulating obscenity and his constant appeals to family, fit this description perfectly. And while Woodhull advocated for more progressive policies and ways of thinking, most of her audiences still belonged to the dominant paradigm. Woodhull's progressivism was not for the minority immigrant classes who wished to enhance their quality of life. Rather, it was for middle class white women who wanted sexual, political, and economic liberation. Such a progressivism is completely valid and important, but it needs to be called exactly what it is. It only seeks to challenge the status quo insofar that systemic, socioeconomic structures remain in place. Both Comstock and Woodhull sought to enact societal engineering programs that affected the poor, immigrant, disabled, working-class, and thus kept them at bay from threatening the well-being of those who already had a quality of life to protect to begin with.

Comstock and Censorship

For Anthony Comstock, obscenity was the ultimate vice, the ultimate corrupter. Obscenity and corruption included, but was certainly not limited to, materials such as newspapers, half-dime novels, advertisements, gambling, and art. The rather recent formation of a popular culture fueled this fight against all things lewd. The need to quantify the obscenity of such things, as well as Comstock's desire to see that they not find themselves in the hands of the impressionable youth, led him to create the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, the vehicle by which he carried out many arrests. Comstock created the NYSSV out of the YMCA, which Comstock was actively involved in, but believed that another organization needed to be founded in order to pursue his goals with greater freedom and fervor. The NYSSV was incorporated on May 16, 1873, and though it was a privately funded organization, the society was "assured of the assistance of the police in New York City and elsewhere in the state... for the suppression of obscene literature and articles of immoral use."^[64] Thus, the NYSSV became a strong arm of justice and policy-making. Creating the NYSSV allowed Comstock a vehicle by which to combat the inadequacy of the laws, and a "public sentiment worse than dead, because of an appetite that had been formed for salacious reading."^[65]

Comstock explicitly stated that "the suppression of obscene literature and articles of indecent immoral use is the one great object for which the Society was created."^[66] He was not shy in his advocacy for censorship, untethered by appeals to human expression and creativity. By 1902, the organization boasted of destroying "about eighty-two tons of contraband matter," including 904,440 obscene pictures and photos and a staggering 1,679,941 circulars, catalogues, songs, poems, etc. They had also arrested over 2,000 persons affiliated with either consuming or proliferating obscene materials.^[67] The

NYSSV often touted these accomplishments in order to receive more funding from private donors, usually white, upper middle-class men and women of families.

Terms such as "obscene" and "lewd," were strewn all over the rhetoric of Comstock and the NYSSV, but it is hard to quantify exactly what materials these encompass. Luckily, Comstock published many works detailing exactly the kinds of materials he found to be dangerous, such as his rather extensive texts *Frauds Exposed* (1880) and *Traps for the Young* (1883). It turns out that Comstock did not discriminate much when it came to offensive materials. As such, his main concern was involved in how to stop the circulation of seemingly infinite lewd items. Comstock found his main solution in his own line of work. Having been a postal worker for much of his life, Anthony Comstock not only advocated for the censorship of published materials, but also for the termination of obscene transactions through the mail. Comstock saw the mail of the United States as particularly vulnerable to this corruption, since it was "the great thoroughfare of communication leading up into all our homes, schools and colleges" and therefore "the most powerful agent, to assist this nefarious business."^[68]

Using the 1868 New York State legislature bill to regulate obscenity that the YMCA had proposed as a model, Comstock went forth to formulate a federal equivalent. With the support of the New York YMCA, Comstock conducted a very smart campaign at a lucrative time. He got Justice William Strong of the Supreme Court to draft the bill, thus adding the upstanding moral credibility that was needed. After much confusion in the legislative process due to their being many anti-obscenity bills seeking passage, Comstock's law passed the Senate and the House, and "President Grant signed it on March 3, 1873."^[69] This law authorized the position of a special agent in the United States Post Office with power to confiscate immoral matter in the mails and arrest perpetrators, and office that was assumed to be filled by Comstock. The immoral matter in question covered several kinds of material, including "any obscene book, pamphlet, paper, writing, advertisement, circular, print, picture, drawing or other representation, figure, or image on or of paper or other material, or any cast, instrument, or other article of an immoral nature, or any drug or medicine, or any article whatever, for the prevention of conception, or for causing unlawful abortion."^[70]

With the passage of the Comstock Act in 1873, Comstock assured that lewd materials would be far less likely to fall into the hands of the impressionable youth and inspire that most sinful of all feelings: lust. Comstock antagonized lust to the nth degree, declaring it to be "the boon companion of all other crimes."^[71] However, in passing the Comstock Law, he did not only bar lust-inspiring materials from passing through the mail, but Comstock assured that birth control materials and information could not be disseminated to women. With the arrest of "over sixty abortionists" with "all but a few convicted and sentenced," Comstock and the NYSSV also participated in a Foucaultian disciplining and docility of (female) bodies, for the material in question was not merely a lewd novel or newspaper, but rather information and devices by which women could control their bodies.^[72] Comstock's efforts regarding birth control and abortion were not just couched in barring women from exposure to obscenity, but also maintaining a power structure that "insist[s] on absolute male supremacy... since Comstockism makes male will, passion and power absolute to *impose* conception."^[73] The law was extremely effective in bringing those who Comstock regarded as wicked to justice. Such justice was felt even beyond Comstock's lifetime, as the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Comstock Law up into the 1960s.^[74] And though male abortionist doctors were among those prosecuted, it was ultimately women who suffered the ultimate subjugation: the disciplining and regulation of their own bodies.

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Given the fact that Victoria C. Woodhull published many articles in her weekly newspaper that would definitely be considered obscene by Comstock's standards, it is clear that they had completely different opinions on what is degenerate and what should be censored. For Woodhull, this was not newspapers or novels or paintings, but rather human bodies, particularly those of the biologically and socially poor. Though Woodhull had no medical experience other than her stint as a Spiritualist healer, she was quite forthright and confident in her assessments regarding certain biological processes in humans. "Certain poisons in the blood... have a depressing influence on the central nervous system; imbecility, stupidity, dullness..." and those thus afflicted with such a nervous system "must be dealt with harshly or firmly."^[75] Woodhull argued that these persons of unfit health and the offspring they produce present an unnecessary burden on healthy, hard-working members of society. The defective and deficient nervous systems of the lower classes manifest themselves in "irregular habits, bad training, or diseases" that threaten the well-being of all, as well as the advancement of society.^[76] She supported the idea of a difference between races, arguing that "some are more richly endowed with more highly evolved nervous systems," and used such an argument as an impetus for an advocacy of eugenics.^[77]

Woodhull was a strong advocate for the improvement of the quality of human stock, an endeavor upon which she saw women as having the most profound effect. She made it abundantly clear that "no advance could be made until the co-operation of woman was properly understood and insisted upon as essential to any deal society."^[78] Woodhull's feminist perspective produced a rather interesting point of view, shared by many early feminists in the Victorian era: that women, via their choice of a romantic partner, controlled the fate of the human race:

Women by nature, are appointed to the holy mission of motherhood, and by this mission, are directly charged with the care of the embryonic life, upon which so much of future good or ill depends.^[79]

Eugenic feminists thus began to emphasize *rational* over *romantic* reproduction. In this sense, eugenic feminists were very different from their New Women contemporaries, as they actually bought into the biological imperative of marriage and motherhood for women. Eugenic feminists saw such an imperative as a unique and powerful opportunity for women to shape the health and standing of their race and/or class. While on the surface, such a view seems to be empowering to women, it is actually just another example of a Foucaultian disciplining of bodies. Women's bodies became tools of society, of the state, transformed into a utilitarian entity whose main purpose was to produce biologically fit stock. Woodhull bought into such a paradigm, emphasizing that "men are what their mothers make them."^[80] This is truly ironic considering that Victoria stood against locking women into what she referred to as "sexual slavery,"^[81] and yet insisted that a woman's sex should be used not for her own welfare, but for the welfare of humanity.

Though Woodhull does not go into explicit detail into how to prevent unsuitable people from procreating, she does suggest that government should enforce laws "that would teach the people how not to contribute to these over-crowded receptacles of human misery [i.e., prisons, asylums, etc]."^[82] Woodhull attributes social problems to the "paupers, tramps, and professional beggars [that] are largely on the increase," and thus advocates for their reproductive regulation.^[83] This attempt to rob agency from people regarding their own relationships and bodies illuminates the subtle similarities between Woodhull and Comstock. While Comstock focused on robbing people from being able to create, read, or buy any materials that he considered to be lewd, Woodhull wanted to rob people of another outlet of creation: the ability to create another human being. Woodhull and Comstock even share a similarity in their use of rhetoric, for neither did Woodhull shrink from alluding to the bible in her many arguments favoring eugenics. She also adopted a "hellfire" kind of rhetoric, which she used

to emphasize that "man is an animal," and must therefore be limited in some way in terms of their actions and allowances.^[84]

Youthful Innocence and Privilege

While Victoria Woodhull was giving speeches to emphasize women's new role in the determination of biologically sound offspring, Anthony Comstock held firm in his agenda to protect the innocence of the youth and keep them unexposed to various vices and corruptions. The rhetoric employed in the texts of both Anthony Comstock and the NYSSV is a clear appeal to the pathos of concerned Gilded Age audiences. In addition to fiery language, various anecdotes about young men falling into traps of vice and thereby destroying themselves and the reputations of their families were commonplace. There was constant warning against such obscenity that corrupts by "familiarizing the mind with evil and leading thought down to the sinks and slums."^[85] One such anecdote was that of a young fourteen-year-old boy "of respectable parentage" who was caught "stealing twenty dollars from his brother." Upon further investigation, it is discovered that he had "in his pocket one of these papers," these being the licentious half-dime novels and story papers that Comstock so vehemently warns against.^[86] In another example, a seventeen-year-old boy "attending one of the best public schools in Brooklyn" was found in possession of some obscene material, and though he had "respectable parents... [he] ran away and married a servant girl."^[87]

It is clear by the utilization of the dichotomy between a successful family and a poor servant girl that the efforts to preserve youthful innocence were not just an effort to protect youthful virtue in itself, but to protect the upper class privilege that these boys and their families possessed. Comstock warned that "this cursed business of obscene literature works beneath the surface, and like a canker worm, secretly eats out the moral life and purity of our youth, and they droop and fade before their parents' eyes," emphasizing that association with lewd publications harmed not only the youth but their families as well.^[88] The anecdotes Comstock utilized were not the stories of minorities or lower class youth living in an age of corruption exacerbated by poverty, but rather of victimized rich white males who ran away from "respectable homes."^[89] As the latter anecdote exemplifies, these young men often ran away from upper class environments to those of servants and lower class workers. The rhetoric implies that such a fate is a tragedy, and therefore suggests that to be of the lower class is to have less moral worth as a human being. And although Comstock did on occasion chronicle the suffering of the poor, noting the "pitiful" manner in which the "poor starving creature, as he or she... deposits the last half-dime, which should be used to buy bread with"^[90] for one last try at a lottery, it is clear that the audience for which he wrote and the policies for which he advocated were *not* for the poor. The poor were merely a cautionary tale, used to emphasize a compromised standard of living that the upper middle class should avoid at any and all costs.

To further emphasize the importance of a privileged family, and to warn against how obscenity can make upstanding families fall apart, Comstock also connected obscenity to infidelity. He argued that the infidel could be identified through his "unbridles sway of his desires" and his opposition "to all legal restraint," meaning infidels were the ones opposing Comstock's censorship laws.^[91] Threatening that anyone defying his efforts was a person who would in all likelihood violate the trust of his marriage allowed Comstock to emotionally manipulate his reader. An upper class family knew how important marriage was, and for Comstock to suggest that to oppose censorship was to endanger their marriage created a large impetus for them to support his endeavors. The strength of a marriage was intrinsically tied to the family's well-being, both in wealth and in social standing. Preserving a marriage was thus another way of preserving a family's privilege.

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Even though young boys were often the characters at the center of these Comstock anecdotes, girls often made an appearance as well. However, the means by which these girls could be corrupted were almost always of a sexual nature. Comstock warned against such sexual devices, such as acquaintance cards, which were meant to serve "as a means of introduction," but often led to the exploitation of young people by securing their address, and "by this means an innocent girl may be drawn into the meshes of the net of the veriest scoundrel."^[92] In another instance, a young girl of thirteen "stole wearing apparel from her parents in order to obtain the means" to go to bawdy playhouses. When confronted by her mother about this, she replied that "if she was only a little older she could earn all the money she wanted."^[93] Although this latter story is perhaps not inherently sexual, it does suggest a precociousness that implies an early route to matters of a mature nature, such as promiscuity. For Comstock, sexual purity, especially in girls, was directly tied to both their upper class privilege as well as their worth as a human being. To *lose* this purity is to lose the comfortable lifestyle by which their class has afforded them, the respect with which they are treated, and the value they have in society. Comstock's goals of *protecting* purity, as opposed to helping those who have already lost it, affirms his role as a custodian for the privileged.

Though Comstock's rhetoric was used to capitalize on the fear of parents in the Gilded Age over the corruptibility of their children, he and the NYSSV did not necessarily make it secret that they were also advocating on behalf of maintaining the social order. It is often acknowledged that "by the wholesale corruption of our youth, through the blasting influences of the devil's printing press, character is being undermined, and society degraded."^[94] This is an important distinction. Crusader though he was, Comstock was not attempting to pull the lowly and the already corrupted up from their station. At a meeting for the NYSSV, a man by the name of Mr. William E. Dodge gave an address, declaring that "the men who are willing to continue in this traffic in evil... should be treated as outcasts unfit to live in *civilized* and Christian communities"^[95] (emphasis mine). This reveals that Comstock and the NYSSV were set on maintaining the status quo for the upper classes. Their "plea" was for "the young; for the future welfare of our beloved country" and for "the uplifting of society."^[96]

A parallel between Victoria Woodhull's advocacy for eugenics and Comstock's defending of upper class youth can be drawn here. Comstock's sole focus on the wealthy, when he was certainly in a position to have influence over all facets of the social hierarchy, is like a selective social breeding. By advocating for the upper class, Comstock knowingly alienated lower classes and immigrant communities, and such advocacy for the success and strength of the wealthy while ignoring the plight of the poor is similar to the advocacy for limiting reproductive rights to them as well. Comstock thus used the bodies of white upper-class people as political machines by which he could perpetuate an acceptable hegemony that was free of the criminality, pauperism, and obscenity of the lower classes. Poor and minority bodies were used as a political deterrent; an example of what going against the paradigm could lead to.

Victoria Woodhull also relied on the pathos of children in order to add credibility to her arguments in favor of eugenics. In her speeches, she emphasized the importance of children, noting that all of humanity held a stake in their welfare:

In the terrible fight for existence, they [the poor] are obliged to work hard all day... having no time to... consider the terrible evil that they are daily making greater by this crime of reproducing in their offspring their own debilitated condition of body and mind... and these children have not only the hereditary instincts of crime to contend against, but are made familiar from their infancy with vice of every description.^[97]

Woodhull used her interest in the health and security of children to justify her claims about the poor and their inherent degeneracy. It is clear by this particular excerpt that Woodhull bought into the Gilded Age idea of pauperism, as a state that could be inherited. It is also interesting to note that Woodhull talked of "vice," a facet of lower-class life that Comstock also warned against and wished to protect the youth from.

Woodhull saw children as another opportunity for reform, making her a great deal more pragmatic in her assessments and noting that "a perfected humanity must come of perfect children."^[98] To justify this notion, she makes constant allusion to "deep scientific research," since "science is eminently progressive."^[99] Woodhull further added to this scientific approach by asserting that "by study and care out most celebrated breeds of horses and other stocks of domesticated animals have been obtained," and it thus follows that such efforts must be made in the way of human stock as well. But Woodhull's efforts were not merely propelled by her subscription to the popular scientific thoughts of the time. Woodhull was by far the most visible parent of a child with a developmental disability. Her son Byron was born in 1854, and Woodhull was thoroughly convinced that his disability could be attributed to his father's alcoholism. Woodhull would thus insist that drunkards not reproduce, not necessarily because alcoholism could lead to abuse or neglect, but because drunkenness was similar to poverty in that it was an inherited trait.

Woodhull argued that the rights of children begin while they are still fetuses (which is interesting to note since anti-abortionists like Comstock would have agreed whole-heartedly with that notion) and thus deserve the best human breeding possible. Children born to degenerate parents are thus not entirely to blame for their own dissipation, but should rather be seen as victims of outside factors. Comstock and the NYSSV would not necessarily disagree with this notion either, having published that "heredity is responsible in the life of many a child, for a weakened constitution, criminal instincts, and appetites and tendencies to wrong doing."^[100] Also like the NYSSV and Comstock, Woodhull seemed not so much concerned about the plight of the poor and downtrodden itself, but rather with using them as a cautionary tale to warn against the foolishness of putting no thought into reproducing. From "cases of partial and total idiocy" to "the irritable and nervously disagreeable condition of... children," the rhetoric clearly implied that such cases were meant to be avoided and *prevented*, not solved and helped in their present state.^[101]

Another factor of Woodhull's works and speeches that point to a clear white, middle/upper-class privileged bias is the audience to which many of them were delivered. Though Woodhull sometimes delivered her speeches to general, non-specific audiences, more often than not, she delivered them to an audience of Spiritualists. Woodhull herself was a prominent Spiritualist, having gained prominence as a Spiritualist healer in her younger days. Thus, Woodhull had quite a lot of credibility among other Spiritualists, and she knew her words would hold more weight with them. For example, Woodhull's speech "Children- their rights and privileges," (originally titled "The Training of Children- Good Advice to Mothers") was delivered at the Eighth National Convention of The America Association of Spiritualists on September 12, 1871.^[102] "The Scare-crows of Sexual Slavery" was given at a Spiritualist meeting in Silver Lake, MA on August 17, 1873, and "The Elixir of Life" was given at another National Association of Spiritualist Convention on September 18, 1873. Though it is hard to characterize exactly *who* Spiritualists were, mainly because it is difficult to quantify exactly what Spiritualism was, those who were actively involved in creating discourse in the movement tended to be white, mostly Anglo-Saxon, middle and upper-middle class former Protestants.^[103] And though in some aspects, Spiritualism sought to challenge certain societal structures, "they also displayed a profoundly conservative middle-class concern for order."^[104]

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Conclusion

In insisting that children should only be created by the socially and biologically fit among society, it is painfully obvious that Victoria Woodhull is blind to her white, middle class, able-bodied privilege, perhaps even more so than Comstock was. For at least Comstock was completely aware of the privilege he wanted to protect, as well as the communities he wanted to alienate. Woodhull spoke on behalf of justice and rights but alienated those disproportionately affected by discrimination. Furthermore, it can be argued that Woodhull's intentions were not to further disenfranchise the poor or the mentally disabled. She was merely reacting (albeit shortsightedly) to the overwhelming poverty and suffering she observed in the crowded tenements of New York City. Her beliefs were also a reflection of her own experiences as a young woman having been married off from a very young age to a drunkard and bearing the pain of raising a mentally challenged child. She did not intend to make women's bodies docile by assigning to them the utilitarian duty of creating fit offspring. She wanted to give women's bodies the power she felt she did not have. However, the reality is that Woodhull did participate in eugenic thinking, and it is imperative that modern progressives come to terms with this historical reality.

In concluding this paper, it should again be noted that any critique of Victoria C. Woodhull's eugenic thought is not an attempt to invalidate the progress she undoubtedly contributed to. Nor is it meant to strip such things as abortion and birth control of their validity because of their perhaps misguided origins. Such a debate continues today, as American partisans attempt to couch the issue of women's choice regarding their reproductive rights in its murky beginnings. That kind of discourse merely seeks to elicit an emotional response from its audiences and misrepresent the progress that has been made over the past two hundred years. It is entirely reductionist. This paper does not come from a place of such divisive simplicity, but rather from a place of a desire to understand and embrace complexity. It is important to critique social and political movements of the past, not to discredit them, but to allow them to inform policy and movements today.

The argument that Victoria C. Woodhull and Anthony Comstock were not on opposite sides of the spectrum, but rather on opposite sides of the same coin is an important distinction to make, and one that has not yet been made in scholarship on these two mammoth figures in pre-turn of the century U.S. history. It reveals the rather curious way in which extremism can often yield similar results, no matter from which extremity, liberal or otherwise, it comes. Perhaps its greatest significance, however, lies in how it can affect the evolution of social justice movements and feminism throughout history. Revealing the garish blind spots of the advocates for social justice who came before us informs the movements today and ensures progress in the way of inclusiveness. It ensures that mistakes be not repeated, and that we continue to move forward in the truest way possible.

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