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SUPPRESSION OF OBSCENITY IN NINETEENTH CENTURY
NEW YORK

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CSST Working
Paper #31

CRSO Working
Paper #397

July 1989

**FAMILY IDEOLOGY, CLASS REPRODUCTION, AND THE SUPPRESSION OF OBSCENITY IN
NINETEENTH CENTURY NEW YORK**

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**Family Ideology, Class Reproduction and the Suppression of Obscenity
in Nineteenth Century New York**

The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV) was founded in 1872 when Anthony Comstock, a clerk in a dry-goods store, approached the leaders of New York City's Young Men's Christian Association to express his concerns about the availability of obscene literature on the streets and the effects of such literature on the city's youth. The YMCA had mounted an unsuccessful campaign against obscenity in 1868 and decided to make Comstock the chief agent of an anti-vice committee that would ultimately become the NYSSV. One of Comstock's earliest acts was a trip to Washington, D.C. to lobby for the passage of a federal anti-obscenity bill, which he wrote with the help of Supreme Court Justice William Strong (Johnson, 1973:67). The Bill forbade the use of the U.S. mails for sending "obscene" material, including information about or devices that caused contraception or abortion. It also banned the utilization of the mail to tell another person where any such materials could be obtained. A provision of the bill created the position of Special Agent of the Post Office, to which Comstock was appointed and in which he served for forty years. This bill, in combination with action taken by the New York State Legislature, gave Comstock broad powers of arrest, and during his career he arrested over 3600 people for various crimes against morality.

Comstock's earliest efforts were concentrated on arresting abortionists. The fledgling American Medical Association had lobbied successfully for laws which made abortion illegal in almost all states by 1870, but Comstock is credited with being the first effective enforcer of these laws and with making abortion much more difficult to advertise (Mohr, 1978:197-199). In 1878 Comstock arrested Ann Lohman, better known as "Madame Restell," a woman who

was widely known to have made a fortune in the abortion trade. Restell committed suicide before she came to trial. During these early years Comstock also achieved notoriety for arresting the feminist free-love advocates Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin. These were not his only actions against feminists; one of the last acts of his life was the suppression of Margaret Sanger's pamphlet on birth control entitled Family Limitation in 1915 (Johnson, 1973:178). In the years between, Comstock arrested numerous pornographers, free-love advocates, gamblers, lottery agents, and was a vigorous censor of art and literature.

The anti-vice crusade was successful, in part, because of the support of New York City's upper and upper-middle classes. Funding for anti-vice pursuits came from donations. The founders, officers, and supporters of the NYSSV were some of the city's richest and most influential citizens, including J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, William Astor, and the heirs of the Colgate, Cornell, and Dodge fortunes. Fifty-three percent of the society's financial supporters were merchants, manufacturers, bankers, corporate officials, millionaires, or were listed in the Social Register; another 19% were judges, lawyers, physicians, and clergymen. In contrast to the supporters of modern censorship movements, only seven percent of the society's contributors were from the working or lower-middle classes (Beisel, 1988; Page and Clelland, 1978; Wood and Hughes, 1984).

In this paper I will make three arguments about elite mobilization into the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. The first is that the elite supported the anti-vice society because of concern about reproducing the upper class in the next generation. Because the family was the critical institution for inculcating upper class children with the values, tastes, and morals necessary for the maintenance of their class position, elite parents rallied

behind efforts to support the family. The second point is that concerns about the family were driven by increasing numbers of immigrants in the city. In particular, anti-vice reformers feared that immigrants were corrupting their culture--both the value system of the elite and the media, such as art and literature, through which these values were expressed. The third point is that, while there is little evidence to support the theory that fear of the feminist movement motivated the formation of the anti-vice societies, the reformers' perception of the problem posed by the creation of an impoverished immigrant proletariat was shaped by ideologies about sexuality and the family. The threat from the working class was not expressed by anti-vice leaders as a challenge to the interests of capital, but rather as a danger to the reproduction of the upper class as a social class, and to the acculturation of upper class children. Furthermore, responding to the threat to the family required that the traditional family be maintained; specifically, that women serve as moral guardians of the hearth. Thus ideologies about the family and gender shaped the perception of class conflict and the actions taken to ameliorate it.

Theoretical Approaches

The rise of the anti-vice societies have been studied from both feminist and class conflict perspectives. One of the earliest explanations of the founding of the NYSSV was offered by a Leta Hollingsworth (1916) who, focusing on actions of the NYSSV that restricted women's reproductive freedom, argued that the intention of the anti-vice reformers was to force women to remain in their traditional roles as wives and mothers. This is an example of a purely feminist approach to understanding this social movement, an approach which argues that men of different social classes, while existing in a relation of class conflict, share the benefits of the domination of women. Such

explanations have been used to analyze women's situation and to mobilize support behind a number of sometimes conflicting social movements. For example, the modern feminist anti-pornography movement employs this understanding of the antagonistic relationship between men and women, arguing that pornography is the propaganda of female subordination (Dworkin, 1980; LaBelle, 1980; Lederer, 1980; MacKinnon, 1987). Other feminists argue that feminist advocates of censorship are joining men and the new right in limiting the freedom won by women during the sexual revolution of the sixties (Echols, 1984; Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs, 1987). Although she frames her understanding of the suppression of reproductive rights in an analysis of the dynamics of capitalism, the most prominent historian of the birth control rights movement, Linda Gordon, argues that the ideology of true womanhood that developed in the late nineteenth century should be understood as a "doctrine to keep women from escaping their homes," and that working class men benefited from the prudery that "sought to hamper women's efforts to transcend their home-and-marriage prisons" (1977:18-19). The denouncement of sexual immorality by political and religious leaders, and the passage of the Comstock Laws were, Gordon argues, a response to "growing rebellion against the Victorian sexual system" (1977,p.24). According to this perspective, the mobilization of the NYSSV should be understood as an attempt to maintain male control over women in the face of a growing feminist movement.

Class conflict theorists, observing the rise in radical labor movements and urban unrest that occurred in the late nineteenth century, focus on the class-based nature of anti-vice support. Paul Boyer (1968, 1978) attributes the anti-vice movement to elite fear of the urban masses, and contends that nineteenth-century moral reform movements were an attempt by the elite to inculcate the lower classes with values that would render them less

threatening. This argument is similar to the marxist understanding of welfare offered by Piven and Cloward (1971), who argue that charity is used alternatively as a means to force the poor to work in demeaning jobs for poverty-level wages and as a tool to quell lower class unrest. Because the NYSSV was the stepchild of the YMCA, an important philanthropical organization, another possible explanation of the rise of the NYSSV is that it was an attempt to control the poor.

Marxist and feminist frameworks have been combined by some historians and sociologists. One strand of this research argues that the upper class has used the institution of the family, and ideologies about the family, to control the lives of the poor and working classes. For example, Stansell (1987) argues that the elite distributed poor relief on the basis of the conformity of poor families to upper class norms of proper family life. May (1982) analyses Henry Ford's institutionalization of the family wage as an attempt to control workers both at work and at home. Ford based his policy on the assumption that men supporting families were more malleable workers. The assumption that the necessity of supporting a family renders workers less contentious is also found in the sociological literature, although Blee (1984) has shown that families were more likely than isolated workers to create community structures that supported strikes. An underlying assumption in this approach is that the attention of the upper class is focused on class relations, specifically that the upper class deals with the threat from workers through the conscious or unconscious use of the ideologies and institutions of the family and gender.

An alternative way of conceiving the relationship between class, culture, and the family has received much less attention in the historical and sociological literature. Researchers have largely neglected the attempts of

the upper class to form and maintain itself as a social, as opposed to economic, class. A host of institutions, from dance classes to elite prep schools, art museums, and exclusive clubs, create and maintain upper class networks and recreate for each generation of scions a sense of their position and obligations to their family, class, and society (Amory, 1957; Baltzell, 1979; Burt, 1963; Cookson and Persell, 1985; Domhoff, 1970; Ostrander, 1984). These institutions serve to maintain upper class endogamy, a function which unites the upper class across regional and economic divisions and creates a sense of shared class, as opposed to individual economic interests (Blumberg and Paul, 1975; Ostrander, 1984; Zeitlin, 1974, 1988). In the twentieth century, much of the work of maintaining these institutions falls on the women of the upper class, who, while living a privileged life and actively and consciously working to bequeath this privilege to their offspring, suffer from the limitations of their roles and from the dominance of husbands, who usually control the purse (Daniels, 1988; Domhoff, 1970; Ostrander, 1984). While the institutions that maintain upper class cohesion and selectively incorporate aspirants for membership in the upper class seem ancient, most of them were created in the late nineteenth century (DiMaggio, 1982; Jaher, 1982; McLachlan, 1970). This timing suggests that the necessity of reproducing of the upper class, and anxiety about the means by which the upper class would be perpetuated, explain the mobilization of members of the upper class into the anti-vice society. This explanation is consistent with Mary Ryan's (1981) work on the middle class family and support of moral reform in early nineteenth century New York. Ryan argues that when "character" became the most important qualification for professional jobs, middle class parents developed strategies to enable sons to delay work long enough to develop the requisite virtues. Parents also supported movements to restrict prostitution

and the consumption of alcohol, vices that might tempt children who had left the parental home. The anti-vice movement, I argue, shows that the upper class shared these concerns.

Upper class support of the anti-vice movements suggests that the upper class directs attention not only to controlling the working class, but to ensuring the social survival of its own. The present study examines how the elite attempted to reinforce their class position by suppressing ideologies that were threatening to the bourgeois family, and by attempting to protect children, women, and families from the perceived dangers of obscenity.

Data and Methods

This paper will test class and gender based explanations of anti-vice mobilization through content analysis of the annual reports of the NYSSV from the years 1872 through 1884, years when over 80% of arrests were for activities related to obscenity. These reports, written by Anthony Comstock, were used to summarize the activities of the society and to generate support, both fiscal and social, from potential contributors. While the depictions of vice or the reasons given for suppressing it should not be taken literally, the ideologies invoked by Comstock in these reports were intended to play on his readers' fears about vice and its causes in order to elicit donations. If fear of feminists or of urban riots motivated anti-vice contributions, these issues should have been raised by Comstock. The Annual Reports are one of few sources about the NYSSV that have survived. Comstock's correspondence and his diary were destroyed after his death, and the personal papers of the leaders of the NYSSV have not yet been located (Johnson, 1973). Fortunately, texts of speeches given by various elite supporters of the NYSSV at their annual meeting are reprinted in the Annual Reports, and these allow some insight into whether Comstock's ideas were shared by his supporters. Furthermore Comstock,

unlike the other leaders of the NYSSV, was a prolific writer, and his books and tracts provide information beyond what is offered by the Annual Reports.

Analysis of the annual reports reveals that the issue of contraception cannot be separated from the issue of obscenity in the reports of the NYSSV nor in the laws that they lobbied for. The New York state anti-obscenity law, which was successfully promoted by the NYSSV, forbade the distribution of the following:

...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 articles, of an indecent or immoral nature or use, or any drug or medicine, or any article whatever, for the prevention of conception, or for causing illegal abortion (NYSSV, 1877:10).

This law is notable because it links contraception, abortion, and obscenity. This classification of obscene materials is mirrored in the NYSSV Annual Reports. The issue of contraception is rarely mentioned; almost all discussions are of "obscenity." Contraception is portrayed as a mechanism allowing young people, afflicted with lust from reading pornography, to sin while affording themselves and their partners some protection from disease and pregnancy.

We may only hint at the nature of this literature. It consists of books, pamphlets, tracts, leaflets, of pictures engraved on steel and wood, of photographs, cards, and charms, all designed and cunningly calculated to inflame the passions and lead the victims from one step of vice to another, ending in utmost lust. And when the victims have been polluted in thought and imagination and thus prepared for the commission of lustful crime, the authors of their debasement present a variety of implements by the aid of which they promise them the practice of licentiousness without its direful consequences to them and their guilty partners (NYSSV, 1876:5).

There was also no distinction made between articles which were intended for contraception or abortion and those designed to enhance sexual pleasure. All

of these were described as "articles for indecent and immoral purposes" (NYSSV 1878:10-12). Although the "Comstock Laws" are famous as anti-contraceptive laws, contraception and obscenity were inseparable issues in the nineteenth century, and all analyses performed in this paper are of reasons given for suppressing obscenity. Two types of content analysis of the Annual Reports of the NYSSV were performed--one quantitative, the other interpretive. The quantitative analysis, presented in Table 1, is based on coding the reasons mentioned by Comstock for suppressing obscenity. Analysis of the first ten annual reports yielded 230 mentions of reasons for suppression.

Findings

The data in Table 1 do not support the hypotheses that anti-vice mobilization was the result of explicit fears of feminists or of the "urban masses." None of the 230 reasons mentioned linked obscenity to the rise of feminism, and there were no mentions of class unrest or of rioting. Furthermore, Comstock did not offer the suppression of obscenity as a way to ameliorate the demographic changes, such as the decline in the native-born birthrate, that were in progress.

[Table 1 About Here]

The majority of reasons that Comstock gave for suppressing obscenity had to do with the effects of lust on youth. Eighty-five of the 230 reasons, or 37%, were statements that obscenity led to laziness, immorality, lustfulness, criminality, and sometimes even death among youth. Another 42 reasons, or 18%, were statements that obscene materials were corrupting schools; and 10% of the reasons invoked the corrupting effect of obscenity on homes. To understand the support that New Yorkers gave the anti-vice campaign we must decipher the rhetoric about the deleterious effects of lust on children. The remainder of this paper examines ideologies about youth and about social

institutions expressed by Comstock; I will argue that these ideologies were related to the reproduction of the upper class through the re-creation of upper-class children and culture.

Analysis of Rhetoric About Youth

Comstock portrayed obscene literature as a "trap" that destroyed youth both physically and morally. Licentious literature awakened lustful thoughts in young people and aroused in them passions that they could neither control nor suppress:

The boy's mind becomes a sink of corruption and he is a loathing unto himself. In his better moments he wrestles and cries out against this foe, but all in vain; he dare not speak out to his most intimate friend for shame: he dare not go to parent--he almost fears to call upon God. Despair takes possession of his soul as he finds himself losing strength of will--becoming nervous and infirm; he suffers unutterable agony during the hours of the night, and awakes only to carry a burdened heart through all the day (NYSSV, 1887:9).

The most deleterious effect of obscene literature on youth appears to have been its association with masturbation. Comstock cites one college professor who wrote to say that obscene literature produced "the ruinous habit of self-abuse," and that he was convinced that not less than 75% of youths between the ages of twelve and eighteen were "more or less the victims of this soul, mind, and body destroying vice" (NYSSV, 1880:10-11). Comstock argued that masturbation led to insanity, criminality, grave physical illness, and sometimes death (NYSSV, 1878:11; NYSSV, 1879:12). Most significant is Comstock's assertion that youthful lust was a threat to society, and that obscene materials "carried the seeds of destruction far into the social fabric" (NYSSV, 1878:10-11).

One could hypothesize that Comstock's fears of social destruction are actually expressions of fear of working-class youth. Twentieth-century

rhetoric about delinquency often targets poor or minority children as its explicit or implied referent; during the nineteenth century numerous "child saving" efforts were directed at the children of the poor (Platt, 1969; Stansell, 1982). Contrary to this hypothesis, however, anti-vice rhetoric is best interpreted as an attempt to incite fears among potential upper-class supporters about the behavior of their own children. Comstock was explicit in his claims that, although some children received "superior moral training," children of all classes were vulnerable to the ravages of pornography.

The Committee have saddest evidence that young men and maidens in the purest and holiest homes of our cities, and in the most moral communities in the country are by hundreds led to ruin by this insidious foe. If parents still doubt, let them ask an honest statement from the physicians of their acquaintance. Our agent says, "I found in the houses of the wealthiest and best families, in the hands of sons and daughters alike, the vilest books, pictures, and articles; and in some cases the son or daughter has been corrupted while in our best schools, seminaries and colleges. Children of rich and poor, high and low alike, have been thus ruined. In one of the best public schools in Brooklyn, I found one of the worst books ever published, being circulated among the boys, and traced it into some of the best families of that city" (NYSSV, 1877:7).

Comstock repeatedly raised the vision of lust spreading among youth, destroying them while their parents were unaware of the threat. Anti-vice leaders attempted to incite and play upon parents' fears of lack of control of their children.

You think your boy is safe. No boy is safe. How do you know that his last pocket money did not go out in answer to just such a bait as this? (NYSSV, 1876:11)

The threat to children did not only mean that individual families would be saddened by having their children become vice-ridden. The entire society was in danger from the spread of obscenity. Comstock argued that lust was

spreading among the children of the "best" families, with the result that the "best" children are abandoning the values held by their parents.

The result of this literary poison, cast into the very fountains of social life, is found everywhere. It is infecting the pure mind and heart of our youth. They are becoming weak-minded, vapid, sentimental, lustful, criminal. Parents are mourning over the distaste of their children for all that is sensible and useful. The teacher finds study irksome to them; romantic tales, narratives of love, lust, hate, revenge and murder are to their taste. They assimilate what they read, and so down, down our youth go, weaker and weaker in all the mental and moral elements of true manhood and womanhood (NYSSV, 1880:11).

The image painted in these writings is one of the upper class being destroyed, not by masses rioting in the street, but by failure to reproduce itself in the next generation. The class issue invoked is not that of workers versus capitalists but one of the perpetuation of the morals and values, especially but not exclusively sexual, of upper class families.

Schools and the Corruption of Youth

Comstock portrayed the danger that vice posed to schools as a threat to both a social institution and children within. The dealers of obscene literature, he asserted, acted principally through obtaining the names of school children and sending them advertisements for obscene goods. The names of youngsters in schools were allegedly obtained from local postmen, or from lists of pupils in the catalogues of colleges and seminaries. Youthful curiosity was piqued by "attractive and suggestive words" used in advertising circulars; when the students sent money, their orders were filled, "often with the vilest imaginable tract or picture" (NYSSV, 1875:11).

The school was not simply a place with a concentration of children vulnerable to corruption; as an institution, the school itself was created to endow youths with character and credentials for future elite positions. It

was perceived as an institution for social mobility as well as for the inculcation and preservation of upper class values (Jaher, 1982). The claims made by anti-vice leaders about how obscenity was corrupting schools played on parents' fears of being able to pass their class position on to their children. The following passage describes a youth before he was corrupted by vice and is of interest both for the portrayal of the youth and of his father.

What more beautiful in all the world than the youth of manly form, elastic in physical exuberance, his face radiant with the bloom of a pure blood, a countenance bespeaking a conscious rectitude and an unyielding integrity. How many such youths can be found in the various households of the land? How proudly the father of such a boy places him in some select institution of learning, where he can be qualified for future positions of trust and honor! He cheerfully makes every needful sacrifice. (NYSSV, 1878:11)

The image of the corruption of the schools thus played on fears of the perversion of youthful purity, fear that one's children would be downwardly mobile, and also fear that the society would not be able to survive if the principal institution for social reproduction--the school--was destroyed.

Rhetoric about the perversion of children while attending school is particularly interesting because boarding schools were becoming an accepted institution for educating upper class youth and differentiating them from children of other classes. Baltzell argues that, as education became available to everyone, education at a private school became an increasingly important marker of upper class status; therefore private boarding schools flourished during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The schools created networks among elite scions from all over the country, as well as teaching upper class tastes and manners to boys whose parents' wealth was newly acquired (Baltzell, 1979:293-96). The schools, located in small towns populated by native-born protestants, also insulated the children of the elite from "city vices" and "immigrant masses" (Jaher, 1982:102). Comstock's

rhetoric about the corruption of schools should be interpreted as an attempt to arouse anxieties about this increasingly important means of upper class reproduction.

Women, Family Ideology, and Class Reproduction

Although most of the discourse of the NYSSV focused on youth, the discussions of the family and sexuality in their reports reveal that, to the reformers, the preservation of youth necessitated the preservation of the bourgeois family. In particular, the reproduction of the upper class required women's primary role to be that of moral guardians of their children. Comstock did not censor writings solely for their feminist ideas, but he was adamant in his belief that works advocating the end of marriage and promoting free love were obscene. By suppressing competing ideologies about sexuality and the family, suppressing abortion as a form of obscenity, and promoting the idea that women's primary role was to raise children, the anti-vice movement reinforced the oppression of women. However, the anti-vice movement did not rise as a response to changes in the family being wrought by feminism, nor as a movement to maintain women's oppression, as Gordon argues. The discussion in this section will focus on anti-vice ideologies about women and the family and on Comstock's attempts to buttress the elite family.

The data from the Annual Reports in Table 1 reveal that Comstock never mentioned feminism or women's working outside of the home as a reason for censorship. However, Comstock opined about women's proper role in some of his books. Comstock did not mention feminism as a cause of women failing to perform their proper duties as mothers, but he believed that women should be the moral guardians of their children, and that "fashionable society" should not deter them from this duty.

As soon as the babe is born the duty of the mother is changed. A human soul is placed in her hands to care for, instruct, and bring up for the Master. A high and sacred duty. Fashionable society no longer should have a control over her. This gift from Heaven is not a small thing, to be intrusted to some ignorant and often vicious servant girl, but constant care is required to preserve its precious form. Should less care or zeal be manifested in later years to preserve it morally pure and strong? (Comstock, 1967:245)

While Comstock insisted that women's time be devoted to their children, he did not believe that women should be confined to the hearth. He approved of the efforts of individual women, and of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, to eradicate obscenity and promote moral purity in their communities (NYSSV, 1884:10; NYSSV, 1886:12). However, there was ambivalence about the propriety of women doing anti-obscenity work among the directors of the NYSSV, who prohibited women's attendance at their annual public meeting until 1888, for fear that they might be exposed to indelicate topics (NYSSV 1887:31,35).

The protection of women included both protection of womanhood as a whole from being debased by pornography, and protecting individual women from the insults of men inflamed by pornographic lust. Comstock argued that the display of pictures of improperly clad women in public places was "an open insult to our mothers, sisters, wives and daughters" (NYSSV, 1887:13). Not only would women be exposed to lustful gazes from "libertines," but pictures of women in "lascivious postures" would break down "respect and reverence for women, which is one of the safeguards of the community" (NYSSV, 1887:13).

The discussions of abortion in Comstock's books incorporate the ideas that women need to be protected from abortionists, and that the practice of abortion resulted from lustful reading that reduced respect for women. He assigned some blame to women who had obtained abortions, asserting that women, "unless lost to all self-respect," would shudder at passing the former place of business of abortionist Madame Restell, where a "long line of carriages"

once deposited "so called respectable women" (Comstock, 1967:155). He referred to abortion as "ante-natal murder," and attributed the motive of "fleeing the consequences of vice" to those obtained abortions (NYSSV, 1879:11).

More frequently, women were portrayed as young victims of abortionists. Comstock told the story of a father whose daughter left her quiet and pure village for, ostensibly, a visit with friends in New York City. The family received a telegraph summoning them to the bedside of their sick daughter, and on the train to the city the father read in the newspapers of his daughter's "death by malpractice."

He then goes up to this abortion den, and there finds all that is left of his lovely child lying in a filthy hall-bedroom, taken there by the son of a respectable family, whose mind had been debauched, and who, after ruining this maiden, failed to marry her, but took her to this place of human butchery. And what a death! Helpless, alone in a cold, cheerless room, without friends, neglected, brutally murdered by a worse than murderess; for, after inflicting the deadly stab, the victim is tortured by neglect, and left to die in a condition of which the details are too loathsome for publication (Comstock, 1969:417-418).

The necessity of class reproduction prescribed that women's most important duty was to raise children with the morals necessary for being members of the upper class. The ravages of obscenity were not only felt by the children of the upper class, who would be rendered unfit to be elite adults, but by upper class women as well. Anti-vice reformers believed that lust, induced by pornography, threatened respect for women, and also respect for the institution of marriage. Anti-vice rhetoric presented upper class parents with the specter of young men resorting to abortions in order to sexually use the daughters of the elite without having to marry them. It followed that women had to be protected from obscenity, and the institution of marriage had to be protected as well.

Comstock's protection of the family extended to the suppression of writings that attacked the institution of marriage. Comstock arrested several free love advocates, and in his writings discusses monogamous marriage as vital to the maintenance of social order. In an attack on "free-lovers," he says:

With them, marriage is bondage; love is lust; celibacy is suicide; while fidelity to marriage vows is a relic of barbarism. All restraints which keep boys and girls, young men and maidens pure and chaste, which prevent our homes from being turned into voluntary brothels, are not to be tolerated by them. Nothing short of turning the whole human family loose to run wild like the beasts of the forest, will satisfy the demands of the leaders and publishers of this literature (Comstock, 1967:159).

Class and gender are thus inextricably linked in the rhetoric of the anti-vice society, although not in the way that most feminist theorists have hypothesized. Comstock almost certainly did not agree with feminist ideas, but his campaign was not motivated by, nor did it attempt to elicit contributions by exciting fear of, the feminist movement. The campaign to defend "youth" against the deleterious effects of obscenity instead reflected an intense concern about whether the upper class would survive. The efforts of the elite reformers to ensure the survival of their class by defending youth illustrate their belief that the survival of their class was predicated on the institution of the family. For the family to survive as an institution, women had to guard the morality of children and community. Ironically, working class women suffered much more from the Comstock Laws than upper class women, for they could not easily circumvent the laws prohibiting the distribution of contraceptives; consequently they were forced to bear unwanted children, whatever the effects on their health or families (Sanger, 1928; Reed, 1978). This effect, however, should not confuse our understanding of the motivation of the anti-vice society leaders, which was to protect upper

class children. In the process of defending "the family" against the encroachments of free love advocates, pornography, and abortion, the reformers acted to reinforce the existing system of sexual and family ideologies by suppressing practices and competing ideologies that could undermine it.

The Immigrant Threat as a Cause of Mobilization

While discussions of social class in the reports of the NYSSV generally concern the integrity of upper class children, class issues were also invoked in discussions of the people intent on their perversion. The following two stories present the nature of the threat to children that Comstock so feared and sought to make his audience fear. The first story contains one of the few references to blacks made in the society's reports.

A Professor in charge of a leading high school told, in one of our meetings in the West, of an incident occurring in his own school, where a colored man in livery was driven in an elegant carriage to the door of his school, who alighted and entered bearing a tray with some 15 or 20 handsomely addressed envelopes, purporting to be wedding cards...for...daughters of some of the first families in that city. After the man had gone, he opened one of these envelopes and found most obscene and seductive matter, to poison their minds and ruin them body and soul. (NYSSV, 1880:9)

A beautiful little girl, not quite 14 years of age, was returning from one of the select schools up-town to her home. While waiting for a car a miscreant approached her and handed her a paper parcel, telling her to take it home and look at it alone by herself. This sweet, confiding child took the parcel home to her mother first. The mother opened it and was shocked beyond expression to find that several pages of the most abominable matter had thus been placed in the hands of her beloved child. The father sent this package to our office, and the utmost vigilance has thus far failed to discover this worse than vampire, who had sought in this manner to debauch and ruin the child. (NYSSV, 1884:7-8)

What is most interesting about these stories is the motive assigned to the purveyors of pornography. While Comstock frequently cited profit as the sellers' motive (NYSSV, 1876:6), in these cases there appears to be no motive except the desire to offend upper class morality and expose elite girls to sexual literature. The story of the black man is interesting both because it played on fears of black's sexuality and because the man was in the livery of his social superiors while simultaneously trying to corrupt the children of the families he served. This is class and ethnic conflict of a very strange form, in which the enemies of the upper class are often portrayed as devious and invisible. The anti-vice reformers appeared to fear an enemy they could not see.

The anti-vice reformers did, however, know who their enemy was. References to immigrants and the threat they posed to respectable society were frequent and explicit. While the nineteenth century anti-vice society was not an anti-immigrant crusade--they did not, for example, agitate for restrictions on immigration or for the disenfranchisement of immigrants--Comstock thought that immigrants were largely to blame for the promulgation of obscenity, and he played on fears of foreigners in order to elicit contributions to his cause. For example, in an early report on the nationality of those he has arrested, he stated that:

It will be seen at a glance that we owe much of this demoralization to the importation of criminals from other lands. Of the 48 persons found in this traffic during the year, but 17 were Americans. Of the 193 arrested during the entire work of the Society, but 50 were our own countrymen. It is some comfort to hope that our native-born citizens will more and more eschew this vile traffic (NYSSV, 1876:11).

Immigrants posed multiple threats to the power of New York's upper class. Between 1860 and 1880 the proportion of the population who were first or second generation immigrants increased dramatically. As immigrants became

an increasingly large proportion of the city population they gained control of the city government as well (Teaford, 1984). Although the failure of the upper class to control city government was ultimately a major concern of the anti-vice society (Beisel, 1988), this was not the only immigrant threat perceived by the elite. During the campaign against obscenity the major immigrant threat that the upper class leaders of the anti-vice society expressed and responded to was the corruption of elite culture. The culture of the upper class was besieged in two ways--first, there was the issue of whether the values of the upper class would be perpetuated in the next generation, as previously discussed. But also at issue was the "high culture" of the upper class--literature and art--and particularly, the effects of such material on youth.

Beginning in 1879 censorship of "the classics" posed a particularly vexing issue for Comstock and the NYSSV. Comstock claimed that, once the more common forms of obscenity were suppressed, the dealers of obscene materials began issuing translations of Italian classics "which are celebrated the world over for their indecencies" as a substitute (NYSSV, 1883:7). Comstock recognized art as something of a privileged sphere, but credited foreigners with mounting a virtual campaign to corrupt the morality of American children.

We have cleared many shop windows, and checked the tide of obscenity which had been coming from France and other European countries under the specious protection of art. We maintain that Genius has not more right to be nasty than the common mind; that the French artist has acquired no right to debauch the minds and morals of our land, simply because he has conceived in his mind a lascivious picture, and then wrought it on canvas.

It is not a question of art at all, it is simply this, shall foreigners or others bring lewd, obscene and indecent pictures here and display them in public windows, to the detriment of the morals of our youth? (NYSSV, 1884:11)

Comstock's rhetoric about art is comparable to his statements about private schools; both "high art" and elite boarding schools were new institutions for reproducing the upper class. Many of the country's great art museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Art, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, were founded in latter part of the nineteenth century (Burt, 1963; DiMaggio, 1982; Jaher, 1982). Comstock's discussions of art raise the issue of whether this new institution would transmit upper class values or, as with boarding schools, be a possible mechanism for subverting them.

The creation of an urban underclass posed several problems for the elite of New York City. The industrialization of the city created poverty on a scale previously unknown, immigrant slums, and crime. The anti-vice movement was one of several responses to this new class, and to observers a century later, a curious response at that. The widespread elite support of the anti-vice society is understandable, however, because the survival of the upper class was predicated on the successful acculturation of elite children, a process that the elite believed was threatened by an alien immigrant culture. Both the structural role of the family in recreating the upper class, and ideas about sexuality and the effects of sexuality on children and the family, were important causes of anti-vice mobilization. Comstock linked anxiety about the immigrant poor to existing fears about sexuality in order to generate support from New York City's most powerful families, thus creating a movement which affected the sexual practices of Americans well into the twentieth century.

Discussion

The history of the anti-vice society has implications for the formulation of marxian and feminist theories. Aspects of both theoretical

interpretations of anti-vice mobilization are supported by this analysis. The explanation offered by Boyer, that moral reform movements result from the threat of the urban poor, is consistent with the explanation offered here. However, the marxian formulation does not adequately perceive the nature of the threat experienced by the elite. In focusing on lower-class collective actions, such as riots and strikes, marxian theorists cling to the notion that only material goods, particularly property and profits, are the objects of class struggle and bourgeois interest. The intense concern expressed by the anti-vice leaders about the maintenance of the family and the values of youth substantiate the notion that upper class parents are greatly interested in the values and morals of their children, and with the reproduction of the culture, values, and position of their class. Although "pressure from below" may explain elite mobilization into social movements, the consciousness, ideology, and concerns of the upper class should not be imputed from an economic interpretation of class conflict.

Similarly, while the feminist interpretation of the anti-vice movement draws attention to effects of the anti-vice crusade on women, it fails to distinguish between intended and unintended outcomes of elite actions. The anti-vice movement was a movement to protect and perpetuate the bourgeois family. Anti-vice reformers assumed that women must remain in the home for society to survive. However, the principal intent of the reformers was not to maintain women's oppression. The evidence offered in this paper does not support the hypothesis that concern about the feminist movement and the desire to keep women subordinate caused the anti-vice movement. The furthered oppression of women--and the suppression of contraception ultimately had profound affects on the lives of women, particularly women of the working classes--was the result of reformers using existing ideologies about the

family to interpret the consequences of the creation of an immigrant proletariat. Although not an anti-feminist movement, the anti-vice crusade was a movement to buttress the upper class family against ideas about sexuality and the family that threatened their class survival.

In the nineteenth century as well as the twentieth, the family has occupied a realm where class and gender conflict interact. This work suggests that marxist theorists have been remiss in not examining the specific mechanism that physically reproduces the upper class--the family--as an object of bourgeois concern and action. The data analyzed here show that concern about class reproduction motivates upper class actions in the realms of family and gender.

The anti-vice reformers appealed to the New York elite by arguing that in order to preserve their class values against the encroachment of foreigners, they must preserve the family and defend their culture against threatening depictions of sexuality. The analysis in this paper suggests that the reinforcement of class cultures is an important source of elite moral reform movements.

Table 1: Reasons for Suppressing Obscenity, NYSSV Annual Reports 1872-1884
(N=230)

Class Conflict 0.5%

- Creates lower class criminals (1)
- Leads to lower class unrest (0)
- Makes lower class work less hard (0)

Gender 0%

- Makes women avoid motherhood (0)
- Encourages women's political activity (0)
- Encourages women to work (0)

Population Size 0%

- Decline in yankee birth rate (0)
- Immigrant birth rate too high (0)
- Too many immigrants (0)

Control of Youth 37%

- Leads to youth becoming immoral (32)
- Leads to youth becoming criminal (7)
- Makes youth dissipated or lazy (4)
- Turns girls into prostitutes (1)
- Leads to death of youths (10)
- Corrupts youths (17)
- Ruins youths (8)
- Other youth related reasons (8)

Morality 12%

- Encourages unchaste behavior (8)
- Conceals lapse from chastity (5)
- Leads to masturbation (3)
- Encourages prostitution (0)
- Corrupts people (9)
- Other morality related reasons (3)

Social Institutions 40%

- Material threatens schools (42)
- Material threatens homes (23)
- Material corrupts other institutions (4)
- Material causes social breakdown (17)
- Other reasons about social institutions (6)

Other reasons 10%

- Expands number of irregular physicians (3)
- Persons spreading material are criminal (24)

* Reasons coded from the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice Annual Reports for 1872-1884. Percentages represent the percent of reasons in each category; the numbers in parentheses represent mentions of each specific reason. Due to rounding error the percentages do not sum to 100%.

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