

SOCIAL DEVICES FOR IMPELLING WOMEN TO BEAR AND REAR CHILDREN

Leta S. Hollingworth (1916)

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"Again, the breeding function of the family would be better discharged if public opinion and religion conspired, as they have until recently, to crush the aspirations of woman for a life of her own. But the gain would not be worth the price."--E. A. Ross, *Social Control* (1904).

In this quotation from Ross we have suggested to us an exceedingly important and interesting phase of social control, namely, the control by those in social power over those individuals who alone can bring forth the human young, and thus perpetuate society. It is necessary that at the very outset of this discussion we should consent to clear our minds of the sentimental conception of motherhood and to look at facts. Sumner^[1] states these facts as well as

they have ever been stated, in his consideration of the natural burdens of society. He says:

Children add to the weight of the struggle for existence of their parents. The relation of parent to child is one of sacrifice. The interests of parents and children are antagonistic. The fact that there are or may be compensations does not affect the primary relation between the two. It may well be believed that, if procreation had not been put under the dominion of a great passion, it would have been caused to cease by the burdens it entails.

This is especially true in the case of the mothers.

The fact is that child-bearing is in many respects analogous to the work of soldiers: it is necessary for tribal or national existence; it means great sacrifice of personal advantage; it involves danger and suffering, and, in a certain percentage of cases, the actual loss of life. Thus we should expect that there would be a continuous social effort to insure the group-

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interest in respect to population, just as there is a continuous social effort to insure the defense of the nation in time of war. It is clear, indeed, that the social [p. 20] devices employed to get children born, and to get soldiers slain, are in many respects similar.

But once the young are brought into the world they still must be reared, if society's ends are to be served, and here again the need for and exercise of social control may be seen. Since the period of helpless infancy is very prolonged in the human species, and since the care of infants is an onerous and exacting labor, it would be natural for all persons not biologically attached to infants to use all possible devices for fastening the whole burden of infant-tending upon those who are so attached. We should expect this to happen, and we shall see, in fact, that there has been consistent social effort to establish as a norm the woman whose vocational proclivities are completely and "naturally" satisfied by child-bearing and child-rearing, with the related domestic activities.

There is, to be sure, a strong and fervid insistence on the "maternal instinct," which is popularly supposed to characterize all women equally, and to furnish them with an all-consuming desire for parenthood, regardless of the personal pain, sacrifice, and disadvantage involved. In the absence of all verifiable data, however, it is only common-sense to guard against accepting as a fact of human nature a doctrine which we might well expect to find in use as a means of social control. Since we possess no scientific data at all on this phase of human psychology, the most reasonable assumption is that if it were possible to obtain a quantitative measurement of maternal instinct, we should find this trait distributed among women, just as we have found all other traits distributed which have yielded to quantitative measurement. It is most reasonable to assume that we should obtain a curve of distribution, varying from an extreme where individuals have a zero or negative interest in caring for infants, through a mode where there is a moderate amount of impulse to such duties, to an extreme where the only vocational or personal interest lies in maternal activities.

The facts, shorn of sentiment, then, are: (1) The bearing and rearing of children is necessary for tribal or national existence and aggrandizement. (2) The bearing and rearing of children is painful, dangerous to life, and involves long years of exacting labor and [p. 21] self-sacrifice. (3) There is no verifiable evidence to show that a maternal instinct exists in women of such all-consuming strength and fervor as to impel them voluntarily to seek the pain, danger, and exacting labor involved in maintaining a high birth rate.

We should expect, therefore, that those in control of society would invent and employ devices for impelling women to maintain a birth rate sufficient to insure enough increase in the population to offset the wastage of war and disease. It is the purpose of this paper to cite specific illustrations to show just how the various social institutions have been brought to bear on women to this end. Ross has classified the means which society takes and has taken to secure order, and insure that individuals will act in such a way as to promote the interests of the group, *as those interests are conceived by those who form "the radiant points of social control."* These means, according to the analysis of Ross, are public opinion, law, belief, social suggestion, education, custom, social religion, personal ideals (the type), art, personality, enlightenment, illusion, and social valuation. Let us see how some of these means have been applied in the control of women.

Personal ideals (the type). -- The first means of control to which I wish to call attention in the present connection is that which Ross calls "personal ideals." It is pointed out that "a developed society presents itself as a system of unlike individuals, strenuously pursuing their personal ends." Now, for each person there is a "certain zone of requirement," and since "altruism is quite incompetent to hold each unswervingly to the particular activities and forbearances belonging to his place in the social system," the development of such allegiance must be --

effected by means of types or patterns, which society induces its members to adopt as their guiding ideals..... To this end are elaborated various patterns of conduct and of character, which may be termed social types. These types may become in the course of time personal ideals, each for that category of persons for which it is intended.

For women, obviously enough, the first and most primitive "zone of requirement" is and has been to produce and rear families large enough to admit of national warfare being carried on, and of colonization. [p. 22]

Thus has been evolved the social type of the "womanly woman," "the normal woman," the chief criterion of normality being a willingness to engage enthusiastically in maternal and allied activities. All those classes and professions which form "the radiant points of social control" unite upon this criterion. Men of science announce it with calm assurance (though failing to say on what kind or amount of scientific data they base their remarks). For instance, McDougall[2] writes:

The highest stage is reached by those species in which each female produces at birth but one or two young, and protects them so efficiently that most of the young born reach maturity; the maintenance of the species thus becomes in the main the work of the parental instinct. In such species the protection and cherishing of the young is the constant and all-absorbing occupation of the mother, to which she devotes all her energies, and in the course of which she will at anytime undergo privation, pain, and death. The instinct (maternal instinct) becomes more powerful than any other, and can override any other, even fear itself.

Professor Jastrow[3] writes:

.... *charm* is the technique of the maiden, and *sacrifice* the passion of the mother. One set of feminine interests expresses more distinctly the issues of courtship and attraction; the other of qualities of motherhood and devotion.

The medical profession insistently proclaims desire for numerous children as the criterion of normality for women, scornfully branding those so ill-advised as to deny such desires as "abnormal." As one example among thousands of such attempts at social control let me quote the following, which appeared in a New York newspaper on November 29, 1915:

Only abnormal women want no babies. Trenchant criticism of modern life was made by Dr. Max G. Schlapp, internationally known as a neurologist. Dr. Schlapp addressed his remarks to the congregation of the Park Avenue M.E.Church. He said, "The birth rate is falling off. Rich people are the ones who have no children, and the poor have the greatest number of offspring. Any woman who does not desire offspring is abnormal. We have a large number, particularly among the women, who do not want children. Our social society is becoming intensely unstable." [p. 23]

And this from the *New York Times*, September 5, 1915:

Normally woman lives through her children; man lives through his work.

Scores of such implicit attempts to determine and present the type or norm meet us on every hand. This norm has the sanction of authority, being announced by men of greatest prestige in the community. No one wishes to be regarded by her fellow-creatures as "abnormal" or "decayed." The stream of suggestions playing from all points inevitably has its influence, so that it is or was, until recently, well-nigh impossible to find a married woman who would admit any conflicting interests equal or paramount to the interest of caring for children. There is a universal refusal to admit that the maternal instinct, like every other trait of human nature, might be distributed according to the probability curve.

Public opinion. --Let us turn next to public opinion as a means of control over women in relation to the birth rate. In speaking of public opinion Ross says:

Haman is at the mercy of Mordecai. Rarely can one regard his deed as fair when others find it foul, or count himself a hero when the world deems him a wretch..... For the mass

of men the blame and the praise of the community are the very lords of life.

If we inquire now what are the organs or media of expression of public opinion we shall see how it is brought to bear on women. The newspapers are perhaps the chief agents, in modern times, in the formation of public opinion, and their columns abound in interviews with the eminent, deploring the decay of the population. Magazines print articles based on statistics of depopulation, appealing to the patriotism of women. In the year just passed fifty-five articles on the birth rate have chanced to come to the notice of the present writer. Fifty-four were written by men, including editors, statesmen, educators, ex-presidents, etc. Only one was written by a woman. The following quotation is illustrative of the trend of all of them:

M. Emil Reymond has made this melancholy announcement in the Senate: "We are living in an age when women have pronounced upon themselves a judgment that is dangerous in the highest degree to the development of the population. We have the right to do what we will with the life that is in us, say they." [p. 24]

Thus the desire for the development of interests and aptitudes other than the maternal is stigmatized as "dangerous," "melancholy," "degrading," "abnormal," "indicative of decay." On the other hand, excessive maternity receives many cheap but effective rewards. For example, the Jesuit priests hold special meetings to laud maternity. The German Kaiser announces that he will now be godfather to seventh, eighth, and ninth sons, even if daughters intervene. The ex-President has written a letter of congratulation to the mother of nine.

Law. -- Since its beginning as a human institution law has been a powerful instrument for the control of women. The subjection of women was originally an irrational consequence of sex differences in reproductive function. It was not *intended* by either men or women, but simply resulted from the natural physiological handicaps of women, and the attempts of humanity to adapt itself to physiological nature through the crude methods of trial and error. When law was formulated, this subjection was defined, and thus furthered. It would take too long to cite all the legal provisions that contribute, indirectly, to keep women from developing individualistic interests and capacities. Among the most important indirect forces in law which affect women to keep them child-bearers and child-rearers only are those provisions that tend to restrain them from possessing and controlling property. Such provisions have made of women a comparatively possessionless class, and have thus deprived them of the fundamentals of power. While affirming the essential nature of woman to be satisfied with maternity and with maternal duties only, society has always taken every precaution to close the avenues to ways of escape therefrom.

Two legal provisions which bear directly on women to compel them to keep up the birth rate may be mentioned here. The first of these is the provision whereby sterility in the wife may be made a cause of divorce. This would be a powerful inducement to women who loved their husbands to bear children if they could. The second provision is that which forbids the communication of the data of science in the matter of the means of birth control. The American laws are very drastic on this point. Recently in New York City a man was sentenced to prison for violating this law. [p. 25]

The more advanced democratic nations have ceased to practice military conscription. They no longer conscript their men to bear arms, depending on the volunteer army. But they conscript their women to bear children by legally prohibiting the publication or communication of the knowledge which would make child-bearing voluntary.

Child-rearing is also legally insured by those provisions which forbid and punish abortion, infanticide, and infant desertion. There could be no better proof of the insufficiency of maternal instinct as a guaranty of population than the drastic laws which we have against birth control, abortion, infanticide, and infant desertion.

Belief. -- Belief, "which controls the hidden portions of life," has been used powerfully in the interests of population. Orthodox women, for example, regard family limitation as a sin,

punishable in the hereafter. Few explicit exhortations concerning the birth rate are discoverable in the various "Words" of God. The belief that family limitation will be punished in the hereafter seems to have been evolved mainly by priests out of the slender materials of a few quotations from Holy Writ, such as "God said unto them, 'Multiply and replenish the earth,'" and from the scriptural allusion to children as the gifts of God. Being gifts from God, it follows that they may not be refused except at the peril of incurring God's displeasure.

Education. -- The education of women has always, until the end of the nineteenth century, been limited to such matters as would become a creature who could and should have no aspirations for a life of her own. We find the proper education for girls outlined in the writings of such educators as Rousseau, Fénelon, St. Jerome, and in Godey's *Lady's Book*. Not only have the "social guardians" used education as a negative means of control, by failing to provide any real enlightenment for women, but education has been made a positive instrument for control. This was accomplished by drilling into the young and unformed mind, while yet it was too immature to reason independently, such facts and notions as would give the girl a conception of herself only as future wife and mother. Rousseau, for instance, demanded freedom and individual liberty of [p. 26] development for everybody except Sophia, who was to be deliberately trained up as a means to an end. In the latter half of the nineteenth century when the hard battle for the real enlightenment of women was being fought, one of the most frequently recurring objections to admitting women to knowledge was that "the population would suffer," "the essential nature of woman would be changed," "the family would decay," and "the birth rate would fall" Those in control of society yielded up the old prescribed education of women only after a stubborn struggle, realizing that with the passing of the old training an important means of social control was slipping out of their hands.

Art. -- A very long paper might be written to describe the various uses to which art has been put in holding up the ideal of motherhood; The mother, with children at her breast, is the favorite theme of artists. The galleries of Europe are hung full of Madonnas of every age and degree. Poetry abounds in allusions to the sacredness and charm of motherhood, depicting the yearning of the adult for his mother's knee. Fiction is replete with happy and adoring mothers. Thousands of songs are written and sung concerning the ideal relation which exists between mother and child. In pursuing the mother-child theme through art one would not be led to suspect that society finds it necessary to make laws against contraconception, infanticide, abortion, and infant desertion. Art holds up to view only the compensations of motherhood, leaving the other half of the theme in obscurity, and thus acting as a subtle ally of population.

Illusion. -- This is the last of Ross's categories to which I wish to refer. Ross says:

In the taming of men there must be provided coil after coil to entangle the unruly one. Mankind must use snares as well as leading-strings, will-o-the-wisps as well as lanterns. The truth by all means, if it will promote obedience, but in any case obedience! We shall examine not creeds now, but the films, veils, hidden mirrors, and half lights by which men are duped as to that which lies nearest them, their own experience. This time we shall see men led captive, not by dogmas concerning a world beyond experience, but by artfully fostered misconceptions of the pains, satisfactions, and values lying under their very noses.

One of the most effective ways of creating the desired illusion about any matter is by concealing and tabooing the mention of all [p. 27] the painful and disagreeable circumstances connected with it. Thus there is a very stern social taboo on conversation about the processes of birth. The utmost care is taken to conceal the agonies and risks of child-birth from the young. Announcement is rarely made of the true cause of deaths from child-birth. The statistics of maternal mortality have been neglected by departments of health, and the few compilations which have been made have not achieved any wide publicity or popular discussion. Says Katharine Anthony, in her recent book on *Feminism in Germany and Scandinavia* (1915):

There is no evidence that the death rate of women from child-birth has caused the governing classes many sleepless nights.

Anthony gives some statistics from Prussia (where the figures have been calculated), showing that

between 1891 and 1900 11 per cent of the deaths of all women between the age of twenty-five and forty years occurred in child-birth.... During forty years of peace Germany lost 400,000 mothers' lives, that is, ten times what she lost in soldiers' lives in the campaign of 1870 and 1871.

Such facts would be of wide public interest, especially to women yet there is no tendency at all to spread them broadcast or to make propaganda of them. Public attention is constantly being called to the statistics of infant mortality, but the statistics of maternal mortality are neglected and suppressed.

The pains, the dangers, and risks of child-bearing are tabooed as subjects of conversation. The drudgery, the monotonous labor and other disagreeable features of child-rearing are minimized by "the social guardians." On the other hand, the joys and compensations of motherhood are magnified and presented to consciousness on every hand. Thus the tendency is to create an illusion whereby motherhood will appear to consist of compensations only and thus come to be desired by those for whom the illusion is intended.

There is one further class of devices for controlling women that does not seem to fit any of the categories mentioned by Ross. I refer to threats of evil consequence to those who refrain from child-bearing. This class of social devices I shall call "*bugaboos*." [p. 28] Medical men have done much to help population (and at the same time to increase obstetrical practice!) by inventing bugaboos. For example, it is frequently stated by medical men, and is quite generally believed by women, that if first child-birth is delayed until the age of thirty years the pains and dangers of the process will be very gravely increased, and that therefore women will find it advantageous to begin bearing children early in life. It is added that the younger the woman begins to bear the less suffering will be experienced. One looks in vain, however, for any objective evidence that such is the case. The statements appear to be founded on no array of facts whatever, and until they are so founded they lie under the suspicion of being merely devices for social control.

One also reads that women who bear children live longer on the average than those who do not, which is taken to mean that child-bearing has a favorable influence on longevity. It may well be that women who bear many children live longer than those who do not, but the only implication probably is that those women who could not endure the strain of repeated births died young, and thus naturally did not have many children. The facts may indeed be as above stated, and yet child-bearing may be distinctly prejudicial to longevity.

A third bugaboo is that if a child is reared alone, without brothers and sisters, he will grow up selfish, egoistic, and an undesirable citizen. Figures are, however, so far lacking to show the disastrous consequences of being an only child.

From these brief instances it seems very clear that "the social guardians" have not really believed that maternal instinct is alone a sufficient guaranty of population. They have made use of all possible social devices to insure not only child-bearing, but child-rearing. Belief, law, public opinion, illusion, education, art, and bugaboos have all been used to re-enforce maternal instinct. We shall never know just how much maternal instinct alone will do for population until all the forces and influences exemplified above have become inoperative. As soon as women become fully conscious of the fact that they have been and are controlled by these devices the latter will become useless, and we shall get a truer measure of maternal feeling. [p. 29]

One who learns why society is urging him into the straight and narrow way will resist its pressure. One who sees clearly how he is controlled will thenceforth be emancipated. To betray the secrets of ascendancy is to forearm the individual in his struggle with society.

The time is coming, and is indeed almost at hand, when all the most intelligent women of the

community, who are the most desirable child-bearers, will become conscious of the methods of social control. The type of normality will be questioned; the laws will be repealed and changed; enlightenment will prevail; belief will be seen to rest upon dogmas; illusion will fade away and give place to clearness of view; the bugaboos will lose their power to frighten. How will "the social guardians" induce women to bear a surplus population when all these cheap, effective methods no longer work?

The natural desire for children may, and probably will, always guarantee a stationary population, even if child-bearing should become a voluntary matter. But if a surplus population is desired for national aggrandizement, it would seem that there will remain but one effective social device whereby this can be secured, namely, adequate compensation, either in money or in fame. If it were possible to become rich or famous by bearing numerous fine children, many a woman would no doubt be eager to bring up eight or ten, though if acting at the dictation of maternal instinct only, she would have brought up but one or two. When the cheap devices no longer work, we shall expect expensive devices to replace them, if the same result is still desired by the governors of society.

If these matters could be clearly raised to consciousness, so that this aspect of human life could be managed rationally, instead of irrationally as at present, the social gain would be enormous -- assuming always that the increased happiness and usefulness of women would, in general, be regarded as social gain.

Footnotes

[1] W.G. Sumner, *Folkways*, 1906.

[2] W. McDougall, *Social Psychology*, 1908.

[3] J. Jastrow, *Character and Temperament*, 1915.

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