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Philippe Aries

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NOTES AND COMMENTARY

Two Successive Motivations for the Declining Birth Rate in the West

I became interested in demographic phenomena not so much for the phenomena per se, nor for the science they inspired, nor for their political, economic, and social effects, but as signs. For they are the invisible signs of what has been happening below the surface and reveal collective attitudes toward life and death, at times almost subconscious and usually kept hidden. Birth and fertility rates are among the most meaningful of such signs. What do they reveal? Recently this question has again gained currency in the context of the Western world, for the 1960s brought a renewed decline in the birth rate, which had temporarily stopped dropping and had even begun to rise.

Public opinion and bureaucrats either rejoiced or appeared worried about the phenomenon; scholars discussed it. Yet the phenomenon should not have been surprising in a cultural climate that, for over a century, had favored a lower birth rate. Still, the fact that the phenomenon is a familiar one does not make it any less disturbing to specialists. Historians reassure them in vain that the phenomenon is far from new; they remain disconcerted. For they suspect that, although the phenomenon does, indeed, seem to be the continuation of an earlier change, it nonetheless springs from different motivations. And doubtlessly they are correct. Indeed, I think that the current resumption of a century-long trend reveals an attitude that is very different from that of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and that undoubtedly reflects a different outlook on life.

As I picture it, this is how things went. In the late eighteenth century in France and in the early nineteenth century in the rest of Western Europe, starting among the upper classes, a new model or ideal family began to prevail in which the number of children and the interval between births were consciously planned by the parents, by means of sexual continence or coitus interruptus. Of course, this new model did not—as was thought during the 1950s—replace a traditional state of affairs that went

back to the dawn of time, a quasi-biological state of affairs that made the fullest use of a woman's fertile years, commencing just after puberty, and a state in which the number of offspring consequently was limited solely by the high infant mortality rate or by mishaps during pregnancy. We know that, by means of interdicts of various sorts, society has always controlled nature and domesticated sexuality. There is no such thing as untamed sexuality. In addition, commencing in the late Middle Ages, and certainly since the sixteenth century, a special demographic system became established in northwestern Europe—that is, in the region that witnessed the Industrial Revolution of the nineteeth century. The geographical coincidence surely is not an accident. This special demographic system was characterized by increased control over young people's sexuality. Marriages were delayed, and illegitimate births were infrequent. Increased age at marriage served as a highly effective brake on fertility, not only during times of economic crisis, but in a permanent, structural way.

This sixteenth-to-eighteenth-century family model is related to two phenomena. The first was the persistence of a traditional belief according to which man had few ways of directly influencing nature. The couple's sexuality and the woman's fertility were still seen as part of an immutable Nature. They could only be affected by indirect procedures such as witchcraft.

The second phenomenon was a change within sexuality itself, resulting from both premarital eroticism among the young, who avoided intercourse, and from an increased degree of self-control, notwithstanding the often conflicting pressures exerted by the church and the community. Morals could, therefore, range from an eroticism that was no longer entirely focused upon coitus, to a strongly repressed sexuality, both of which had in common a control over one's impulses.[1]

Things were, however, different after marriage, and natural and completed intercourse was the absolute norm for the married couple. It did not occur to people willingly to deviate from the normal course of events in order to avoid a pregnancy. The only ways of reducing the number of children were delayed marriage or continence on the one hand and child abandonment and infanticide on the other. But, with the exception of delayed marriage, such procedures were resorted to in unexpected or crisis situations and were not coldly calculated in advance as part of a life plan.

The great change came when husband and wife began to plan their own lives and the births of their offspring. They introduced foresight and organization where formerly there had been only automatic, unplanned behavior and resigned surrender to impulses and destiny.

This extraordinary change transformed the creation of life and the sexual act—which was inseparable from it—into a sphere henceforth governed by the methods of rational and scientific organization, a sort of biological Taylorism. One organized one's family according to a *plan*, just as one organized one's business, one's factory, or one's savings. Planned parenthood existed before contraceptive methods became widespread; in fact, it created a need for such methods and prompted an increasing number of families to use them. Indeed, during this period Western society was shaken by a veritable revolution in sensibility, a revolution as important as the French Revolution or the Industrial Revolution. *Affectivity* became centered about the family and the children. As a result, the family turned less than in the past toward the outside world, toward protecting its property, administering the family business, or defending individuals and their honor. It turned inward upon itself and organized itself in terms of the children and their future. The parents' chief psychological and

material investment consisted of helping the children to get ahead. This society could be categorized as "child-oriented."

The number of these children, who were the objects of such sentimental and maternal concern, could not be left to chance. Wise management required reducing their number to the minimum that corresponded to the family's financial outlook. The fewer the children, the more time and care could be devoted to each and the better the results. Parents came to view their family as a small elite whose members were selected via birth control.

This sort of planning implied the desire to ensure that the children's economic and social status would be superior to that of their parents. Thus, birth control was linked with social mobility. The smaller family model is the one selected by families on their way up. The French sociologist Arsène Dumont used the picturesque expression "social capillarity" to describe this phenomenon.

Fathers were farmers or craftsmen; their sons were school teachers, railroad workers, or mailmen; and their grandsons became highschool teachers or engineers, sometimes graduating from the leading professional schools. A social climb of this sort over a period of three generations was rather frequent during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Wherever there was no social mobility—among factory workers, for example—the high fertility family model persisted. This undoubtedly is why the phenomenon triggered by social capillarity was temporarily concealed from statistics wherever industrialization created large concentrations of factory workers, as in England.

During the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the smaller family model continued to spread, to the detriment of the fertile model. At the same time the middle class was becoming larger, owing to urban growth and the development of businesses not directly involved in producing consumer goods. For a long time the middle class was the chief proponent of the smaller family model.

To my mind, seeing that one's children got ahead in a climate of social mobility was the deep motivation behind birth control.

But this general motivation had to find ways of expressing itself, of being implemented. The wall separating sexuality or procreation from nature had to be scaled. The relationship between man and nature had to be changed.

Progress, and above all the interiorization of scientific determinism, transformed mankind's body and sex into something that could be subjected to various contraceptive techniques, a thing previously unthinkable except indirectly through magic. It became possible to manipulate the human body, to manipulate sex, as if one were manipulating an object. Thus, the human body and sex entered the world of technology.

At first this contraceptive technology was makeshift. The methods chosen were, I believe, inspired by the already long-accepted practices involved in premarital eroticism among the young. These practices involved a noncoital sexuality that avoided actual penetration and developed the physical self-control required for coitus interruptus. In addition, the wall that had separated love within marriage from love outside marriage had collapsed. Husband and wife henceforth loved one another as lovers did, or at least were supposed to pretend that they did.

Accustomed to planning and calculating, husbands were not averse to using the ascetic methods of birth control whose aim was to delay orgasm, to achieve orgasm in some other way than through natural intercourse. They used erotic procedures for nonerotic, contraceptive purposes. A culture undoubtedly would have been unable

to opt for such an ascetic and constraining method of birth control as coitus interruptus—which, as we have discovered, many societies in the developing countries of our day refuse to employ—if two centuries of noncoital, premarital eroticism had not paved the way.

And so the smaller family won out during the 1930s in France and in Western Europe. Then the 1940s and 1950s brought an important phenomenon, the "baby boom," which is important less for its effects than for the light it sheds upon a psychocultural interpretation of low birth rates. The century-long decline in the birth rate was halted among the middle and upper classes, who had by then become large enough to affect overall statistics. Among the lower classes, on the contrary, the trend toward a lower birth rate continued. This explains the famous U-shaped curve of births related to economic status. After World War II, a change in ways of thinking occurred in the developed countries of the West. The smaller family model was related to a way of life characterized by planning and saving. But a new consumer-oriented civilization was substituted for the older one based on savings. It was no longer necessary to be as concerned about planning ahead. An insurance system and above all an economic expansion that people imagined was infinite freed individuals of the obligation to worry personally about their well-being. Individuals henceforth trusted in progress and let themselves be carried along on the great tide that was transporting the world toward the Golden Age. Strategies involving education and moving up the social ladder no longer seemed so necessary.

At the same time increasingly greater value was placed upon family space, that is, the physical space associated with the happy family, whose adornments were the wife and the children. Under such conditions, the brakes of Malthusianism were released and, instead of one child, there were now one or two children; instead of two, there were three or four. A family model based on trustful modernity succeeded a model based on prudent modernity.

People did not, of course, return to the fertility levels of the *Ancien Régime*, and reproduction continued to be controlled; but the general climate seemed to promote the happy family.[2] The child was king and gave every indication of being as desired as he was fawned upon. Consequently, the youngest women of that generation began to feel crushed by the burden of successive pregnancies and by the idea of the wife as a sex object who remained in the home. When I attended meetings at planned parenthood centers during the late 1950s and the early 1960s, I was struck by the idea that predominated there. People had totally forgotten the more than a century of declining birth rates and of birth control. They remembered solely the fertile days of the baby boom and the happy family. They talked as if the family and fertility had not changed since the beginning of time. Women were being urged to revolt against a fertility that was several millennia old. A bit later, when knowledge of demographic studies became more widespread, the attitude of the female militants changed. Coitus interruptus was attacked as the archaic tool of a macho, phallocratic, and nonpermissive society, as well as an unreliable method of birth control. The era of the pill began.

Now that the intervening years permit me to step back and view the behavior of the youngest members of the generation of the baby boom, I see it as an expression of intolerance that was a harbinger of the succeeding generation's behavior. Indeed, things seem to be changing with each generation. People born between 1870 and 1890 constituted the final generation of prudent modernity; those born between 1910

and 1930 are the generation of the baby boom and of trustful modernity; and those born between 1940 and 1950 make up the generation of the rebellious late 1960s.

It might be argued that, after the interlude of the baby boom, people were simply returning to the model of the 1930s, the model pursued by the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. But in my opinion this is not the case at all. Of course this model persists among the "ruling classes," that is, among the very small group whose children enter the elite schools, take the top civil service exams, and provide the individuals who will govern the next generation.

I do not believe that the vast majority of today's neo-Malthusians limit the size of their families in order to create this small elite of future technicians and top civil servants. The reasons motivating this new generation are, therefore, no longer those that governed behavior during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This is certain. In fact, it is the only thing we can be certain about. Identical results have been produced by different causes. It is as if the mental mechanism behind birth control was set up for a given goal in the nineteenth century and, from then on, the same mechanism was employed for other goals. What other goals? This is, I admit, more difficult to determine, for we cannot step back, observe the phenomenon, and interpret it.

Granted, contraceptive technology has been perfected. It has become an absolute weapon, and birth control is no longer a clandestine matter. It is talked about as a routine component of our way of life. Progress of this sort undoubtedly facilitated the use of contraceptives, but it does not explain why they are used.

Three sorts of reasons are usually evoked in guise of explanation. The first is hedonism, the search for pleasure without obligations, which results from such factors as sexual permissiveness. The second reason often cited is a flowering of the personality, especially among women, which makes people hesitate to have children or makes them spread out over time the burden involved in bearing and raising children. Last, reference is often made to anxiety about a gloomy future. People do not want to bear children who will be killed by the atomic bomb or must live in a world that has become unlivable.

To tell the truth, none of these reasons seems convincing to me. They are too direct, too immediate. The ways people look at life usually are determined by more mysterious, more indirect causes. I feel that a profound, hidden, but intense relationship exists between the long-term pattern of the birth rate and attitudes toward the child. The decline in the birth rate that began at the end of the eighteenth century and continued until the 1930s was unleashed by an enormous sentimental and financial investment in the child. I see the current decrease in the birth rate as being, on the contrary, provoked by exactly the opposite attitude. The days of the child-king are over. The under-40 generation is leading us into a new epoch, one in which the child occupies a smaller place, to say the least.

First of all, the couple has reaped the benefits of those absolute contraceptive weapons: the pill, the IUD, and sterilization. In the past, less reliable, simpler procedures did not eliminate the possibility that unwanted children would be born. Once conceived, they usually were accepted and even on occasion became the spoiled pet of the family. Today, on the contrary, the efficacy of the new contraceptive procedures has eliminated this margin of uncertainty. And if, by chance, carelessness or some accident results in pregnancy, the pregnancy is no longer tolerated. Instead it triggers a violent rejection reaction; an abortion is sought. Indeed, this explains the

place occupied by abortion in today's collective psychology. It is not that people resort to abortions all that more frequently than in the past, nor that they desire more abortions; but the abortion is seen as a last resort. Knowing that it is possible makes people feel secure.

As Alfred Sauvy noted, refusing to have an undesired child is *the* important new phenomenon. In my opinion, this phenomenon does not result from these more radical, more reliable contraceptive methods. It is part of a general frame of mind and is the sign of an important change.

Couples—and individuals—no longer plan life in terms of the child and his personal future, as was the case during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This does not mean that the child has disappeared from such plans but that he fits into them as one of the various components that make it possible for adults to blossom as individuals. His existence, therefore, is related to plans for a future in which he is no longer the essential variable, as he was during the nineteenth century.

This constitutes a major change, but we must not forget that the family goal of seeing that the child got ahead was in itself a rather new phenomenon, which began roughly in the sixteenth century and spread, vastly expanding after the late eighteenth century. It undeniably was one of the characteristic traits of "modernity." The changes occurring today may permit us better to understand *a posteriori* the attitude that traditional societies had about children, before childhood became the focal point that it was after 1800.

It would be a distortion to interpret the attitude of traditional societies as one in which the child did not exist, did not count. On the contrary, he was physically necessary for the reproduction of a society that scorned adoption. But although the family life plan included marriage with desirable families, and although these marriages made numerous healthy children indispensable, the family was not concerned about their psyches and their abilities, about the shaping of their minds and their feelings.

Thus the child's role in the family's plans, and his affective role within the family, changed between the end of the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century. His role expanded. In like manner, his role is changing today, before our very eyes. It is diminishing.

PHILIPPE ARIES

Notes

This paper is a translation of "Deux motivations successives du déclin de la fecondité en occident," presented at the Seminar on Determinants of Fertility Trends: Major Theories and New Directions for Research, Bad Homburg, Germany, 14–17 April 1980. The translation was prepared by Patricia M. Ranum.

1. *Bastardy and its Comparative History*, ed. P. Laslett, K. Oosterveen, and R. M. Smith (London: Arnold, 1980), shows how the rate of illegitimate births probably was related to the nature of premarital sexuality and to the point at which people defined a marriage as beginning. (Initially the marriage involved a process that was spread out over a period of time; later it became circumscribed within the time limits created by a specific ceremony or recorded document.)

2. This is the sort of family criticized by Betty Friedan, the family portrayed in women's magazines during the 1940s and 1950s.