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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Social Control of the Birth-rate
and
Endowment of Mothers.

BY

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"The population question is the real riddle of the Sphinx, to which no political *Œdipus* has as yet found the answer. In view of the ravages of the terrible monster, over-multiplication, all other riddles sink into insignificance."—

PROFESSOR HUXLEY, "*Nineteenth Century*," *Jan.*, 1890.

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Social Control of the Birth-rate and Endowment of Mothers.

DR. WILLIAM OGLE, an experienced statistician and official of the Registrar-General's office, read a paper before the Statistical Society on March 18th, 1890.

In it he says: "the population of England and Wales is, as we all know, growing in a most formidable manner; and though persons may differ in their estimates of the time when that growth will have reached its permissible limits, no one can doubt that, if the present rate of increase be maintained the date of that event cannot possibly be very remote."

On the subject of emigration as a remedy, Dr. Ogle states: "the facilities for successful emigration are yearly diminishing, and the time must inevitably come—sooner or later—when this means of reducing our population will altogether fail us." What is needed, and what we must come to eventually, is an equalisation of the birth-rate and death-rate, producing a stationary state of population. "This equalisation", he says, "can clearly only be effected either by increase of mortality or by diminution of the birth-rate; and as no one will advocate the former, the problem of problems which even now is vexing the souls of those who can

look beyond the immediate future is how the birth-rate is to be reduced."

Fresh light is thrown by Dr. Ogle on the subject of conditions affecting the marriage-rate in England and Wales. He conclusively proves the usual opinion of economists—that the marriage-rate varies inversely with the price of wheat—to be erroneous. No such relation exists, indeed the opposite is more nearly the case. "The marriage-rate varies not inversely, but directly, with the price of wheat." Tables are given to show the facts of this relation for the years between 1820 and 1888. It is not an invariable rule, but usually when the price of wheat is high, the marriage-rate is high; when wheat is low, marriages are fewer in number. Now exceptions indicate that other important causes exist to affect the marriage-rate and Dr. Ogle asks if changes in the cost of food will not explain the fluctuations in the marriage-rate, what better explanation can we find? He carefully examines the tables of annual variations in British exports and there he discovers a certain ruling relation with fewer exceptions. He says: "The marriage-rate goes up and down synchronously with the value of exports. This can clearly only be because the changes in these values are an indirect indication of corresponding changes in the employment and the wages of the labouring classes; and it would be desirable to obtain if possible some more direct measure of these latter changes. Hunting about for such a measure, I lighted, in the labour statistics of the Board of Trade, upon the annual returns made by certain trade unions in which were given for a series of years the number of members on the books at the end of each year, and also the average monthly number of such

members who were in receipt of benefit as being out of employ." Dr. Ogle finds that a very close relation exists between the number of unemployed in these trade unions and the marriage-rate, which shows conclusively that the marriage-rate fluctuations follow the fluctuations in the amount of industrial employment. Respecting "the apparent paradox of increased marriages with dearer food, and diminished marriages with cheaper food" he offers this explanation: "Men marry, as we have seen, in greater numbers when trade is brisk and when the value of exports increases, but when the exports increase so also do freights, and this rise in freights causes a corresponding rise in wheat, the largest part of our wheat being imported from abroad."

He then goes on to adduce arguments which show that for some time past there has been a slight retardation of marriage in consequence of "the ever-increasing standard of comfort among all classes which makes men and women unwilling to burden themselves with a family until they are assured of a much higher income than they would in former days have held to be sufficient."

Again, in considering marriage-rate variations in the different English counties, it appears that wherever young women easily earn money in industrial occupations, there marriages are earlier and also more numerous.

The age at which marriage takes place is next under consideration, and this is "a subject of scarcely less importance than the rate in its bearing upon the growth of the population." Dr. Ogle finds here that the lowest average age at marriage for both bachelors and spinsters viz: 25.6 and 24.2 respectively, was in 1873, the year in

which the marriage-rate was highest ; and from that date to the present time the ages have gone up gradually but progressively in harmony with the general decline in the marriage-rate.

In 1888 the average age of bachelors at marriage was 26·3 years and of spinsters was 24·7.

The reduction for spinsters has therefore only been about six months for the whole period of fifteen years. Now it is the ages of women at marriage which are all important in regard to increase of population. " There is no reason to believe that a man who marries at thirty will have a smaller family than a man who marries at twenty as long as the wives are of one and the same age." Dr. Ogle refers to the work of Dr. Duncan on " Fecundity, Fertility, and Sterility " and concludes that " the average duration of fertile marriage life for women within child-bearing ages is, with the present ages at marriage, 7·53 years, and that if all these women delayed their marriages for five years the average duration of fertility would be reduced to 5·53 years or by 26·6 per cent. He allows for the illegitimate birth-rate, and finally reaches this summary : " in the very improbable event of all women retarding their marriages for five years, we should have a birth-rate of 23·3 per 1,000 ; doubtlessly a very great diminution of the present rate, but still far too small a diminution to produce anything like an equalisation of births and deaths."

Dr. Ogle has no hope of such an increase of celibacy among women as would effect the desired result in combination with a five years' retardation of marriage, and he concludes his paper thus : " It is manifest that if the growth of population is hereafter to be arrested, and a stationary condition produced, either by emigra-

tion, or by increase of permanent celibacy, or by retardation of marriage, these remedies will have to be applied on a scale so enormously in excess of any experience, as to amount to a social revolution."

We are now in a position to realise the gravity of the population question and to form some conception of the great self-control that would be necessary throughout the nation in order to effectually reduce the ominously high birth-rate. A social revolution is indeed required, though Dr. Ogle gives no hint as to the nature of it. The vast section of degraded populace at the base of our society renders hopeless any thought of this necessary self-control arising among the mass of the people under actual social conditions. Mr. G. Bernard Shaw has admirably put the case in words addressed to the propertied and employing classes. "Your slaves", he says, "are beyond caring for your cries (of over-population), they breed like rabbits; and their poverty breeds filth, ugliness, dishonesty, disease, obscenity, drunkenness, and murder. In the midst of the riches which their labour piles up for you, their misery rises up too and stifles you. You withdraw in disgust to the other end of the town from them; you appoint special carriages upon your railways and special seats in your churches and theatres for them; you set your life apart from theirs by every class barrier you can devise; and yet they swarm about you still; your face gets stamped with your habitual loathing and suspicion of them . . . they poison your life as remorselessly as you have sacrificed theirs heartlessly."¹

Under an industrial system requiring the existence of

¹ " Fabian Essays in Socialism ", page 21.

the two classes—propertied employers and dependent employed, there is no possibility of an effective reduction of the birth-rate. The warning of Malthus has been prominently before all thoughtful persons for nearly a century, nevertheless, to the mass of the people, it remains unknown or unheeded. Moreover an intimate knowledge of the working class gives conviction that the vast majority will put no curb on their procreative power out of regard to the welfare of society, and very little out of regard to their own future domestic comfort. I am personally acquainted with working men who not only agree to the principle of Malthus, but know also the easy neo-Malthusian restraints; yet the families of these men have quickly increased to the number of six or more children. Obviously so long as the wage-earning system seems always to give a chance for each individual to be employed, and a promise to parents that any number of children may also be remuneratively employed, there is literally no force bearing upon ordinary humanity to induce it to prudential limitation of offspring by celibacy or any other means whatever.

You may point to France for some evidence to the contrary; and I do not deny that certain conditions—such as peasant proprietorship—lead to some degree of parental prudence; but France offers nothing towards a complete solution of the great question. The degree of prudence there practised does not accomplish the desired end. The wage-workers of France are in as miserable a condition as the same class in this and other civilised countries. We may rest assured that whatever be the degree of reduction of the birth-rate arrived at under the present economic system, it will fall far short of the reduction necessary for the pre-

vention of the pressure on available subsistence. It represents merely a recoil from that pressure already existing and privately felt.

If we ask what it is that prevents the average majority from adopting restraints that are necessary to the well-being of the entire nation, we must remember that at present the moral relation between society and its individual members is a pious opinion rather than a tangible unmistakable fact. To the non-criminal the solidarity of society and his relation to the whole are principally, almost solely, felt through the payment of rates and taxes and by his exercise of the political and municipal votes. Society is to the worker, from his industrial position, scarcely existent. It recognises no duty to cherish its members and help them to an honourable and sufficient livelihood. Its posture is that of neutrality, of absolute indifference. It leaves them to sink or swim as fortune or ability may determine, and in this irresponsible attitude it has no demand for and no right to claim responsibility on the part of its members towards itself. But the absence of this relation is disastrous in the sphere of domestic and parental life. The having or not having a family is looked on as purely a personal matter. The State offers no assistance and imposes no restraints. The cares of a family devolve on parents alone, and all considerations of prudence begin and end with the individuals directly concerned. It follows in natural course that the ordinary man resents the interference with his liberty of having as many children as he pleases. If he feels any restraints to parentage, these lie within himself and his immediate circle. The gain or loss following from prudence or imprudence falls upon himself; consequently *his choice* is ample

justification of his conduct, whatever that may be. Prudent men may limit their families, but these are not the majority; and so long as the imprudent populate recklessly, it does not promote the welfare of general society that the prudent should diminish the rate of increase of their superior stock. Legislative restrictions would be of no avail under present social conditions. As long as each man fights for his own hand and against his fellows in the struggle for existence, so long will each feel himself free from responsibility to that society which disclaims all important duties to him, and whose attitude is always threatening and unsympathetic.

Premising that enough has been said to make clear the fact that no effective reduction of the birth-rate will take place in society as at present constituted, I pass on to indicate the nature of the evolution necessary to accomplish that end. The evolution must be primarily one of industrial and family conditions. First, the State or Community must become responsible for the welfare of each of its adult members in so far as to provide opportunities of work for all and equalised remuneration to all. Second, the State must endow legitimate motherhood and take upon itself the expense¹ of the rearing and educating of children, thus bringing parents into direct relation with the State and causing them to become responsible to it in the matter of procreation.

This revolution could not be other than gradual, whether the time were long or short. When completed the whole aspect of the case in relation to restriction of the birth-rate is altered. The entire community will

¹ This does not imply interference with family life. Individuals would be free to retain the isolated home or form groups in unitary homes, precisely as they wished.

have brought home to it the knowledge of the amount of available food resources for all, since the State¹ is compelled to keep exact account of supplies in view of its responsibility for the remuneration of universal labour. But with food forthcoming useful work is limitless, and every able worker is a source of wealth to the community.

Poverty, however, is not the only cause of degradation; another fruitful source is sex-inequality, and that must be rendered socially innocuous. State supported motherhood is essential to the emancipation of women from dependence on individual men. In the bearing of a child a woman suffers more or less incapacity for work during eleven months or one year. If the Community does not support her at that period she falls into the hands of a man for sustenance, or depends on her diminished powers for earning a living. In either case she bears a penalty for maternity beyond its natural pains and obligations. On the other hand, there goes with paternity no natural penalty; therefore, clearly, to bring about social equality between the sexes society must make up to the woman her social maternal loss. Evolutionists are agreed in tracing the subjection of woman to her reproductive disabilities; it follows that her subjection can only be put an end to by those reproductive disabilities being counterbalanced by the State. That this logical outcome is the inevitable end of the modern "woman movement" must, I think, become more and more evident to thoughtful minds aware of the principal social tendencies of the age.

I need say nothing here in reference to the exact form of communal support of mothers and children.

¹ It is convenient to use the terms "State" and "Community", but no opinion is expressed about the amount of centralisation necessary for organisation of labour.

It suffices to establish the principle of social equality, which must originate and guide the coming revolution.

Dr. Ogle's paper powerfully forces upon an unprejudiced mind the existence of a vital relation between child-birth and the State. In "Scientific Meliorism"¹ also the author points to this vital relation. "The marriage union", she says, "is essentially a private matter, with which society has no call and no right to interfere. Child-birth, on the contrary, is a public event. It touches the interests of the whole nation."

Nor is the production of new members of a community important only in respect of quantity, but also in respect of quality. Weak constitutions are a burden to society; inferior types are less useful than strong, healthy, superior types.

No sooner does the State begin to exercise control over parentage than maternity becomes a social as well as an individual function. But true social relations imply reciprocal duties, and prominently before the public mind there stand out the duties of prospective mothers to society and the duties of society to all mothers who rightly fulfil the healthful conditions of maternity. Legitimate motherhood is invested with attributes of public respect, and moral forces obtain in the momentous, vital sphere of reproduction.

I have said it is legitimate motherhood that must be State supported; by legitimate I mean marked by conditions of well-being and sanctioned beforehand by the community. Illegitimate—that is ill-conditioned maternity—will carry the penalty of unassisted parental support, for individuals who fail in their duties to the

¹ "Scientific Meliorism." J. H. Clapperton. Page 320. See also to the same effect, "The Law of Population: its Meaning and its Menace". A lecture, by J. M. Robertson. Published by R. Forder, 28 Stonecutter Street, E.C. Price twopence.

community are rightly considered to forfeit the help of the community. This negative penalty would assuredly act as a powerful deterrent in the direction required; moreover it could not involve the difficulties of application attaching to any direct penalties under the present system. What is impossible in an unorganised, degraded society, becomes easy when all members of a community are educated, well-housed, and well-cared for, and where communal protection of the individual demands, and has to be met by, a strict regard on the part of individuals to communal well-being. We must glance now shortly at the difficulties of transition.

I have said that the social revolution will be gradual. A sudden abolition of poverty and establishment of ease of life would eventuate in what? The death-rate would quickly be lessened, the birth-rate vastly accelerated. Young people would marry more heedlessly than they do now. Artificial checks to conception would be ordinarily neglected and the general result would inevitably prove a letting out of the flood-gates of increase. Later the reappearance of general poverty followed by famine, pestilence, and appalling mortality would culminate in reduction of population to the limits of available subsistence. But that this irrational round of social license, disaster, suffering, death, will be played out in a scientific age is inconceivable.

Let us look at the social forces resting upon human intelligence, supported by the scientific knowledge and material wealth of the age, on which we may depend for the counteracting and overcoming of the danger.

Already we have a widespread educated opinion in favour of the necessity for a diminished birth-rate, which, being a true opinion will increase year by year and be powerful during the coming revolution. We have also, what never existed before, a scientific

knowledge of natural laws, of social conditions, and of Humanity's powers and limitations, with a philosophic conception of the varied relations that interpenetrate and control the whole. The accelerated birth-rate will be foreseen and steps taken to meet its requirements by increased production of food. It is well-known that by better cultivation of the land the produce of this country may be easily doubled. This then will be done, and time gained for the generation which is degraded by present evil social conditions to die out. Meanwhile, education for the new generation will be generously, lavishly, provided. The momentous issues of education are no longer ignored. It is seen that to spend on our Board Schools four times the amount we now do, to give free breakfasts and dinners to the children, no matter at what cost, is a policy incalculably beneficial in the long run. The essential points to be gained are that the young should revolt from surroundings that degrade and should be morally and intellectually quickened to such impressions as will render them social and useful as members of a society rapidly advancing to better and happier conditions of life.

In the earlier stages of transition, state support of motherhood can only be broached, not enacted. When enacted it cannot be general, because it would only apply to authorised parentage. But all prospective parents would seek for similar advantages if possible, unauthorised maternity would be discountenanced, and an intelligent adoption of checks preventive of conception would become universal. From this must follow in natural sequence the steady reduction of illegitimate parentage, and the birth-rate.

In this connection, too, let it be remembered that women, free from men's domination and able to earn their living as readily and easily as men, will assuredly

refuse to be constantly bearing children, to the injury of their health and the crippling of their lives by excessive gestation and nursing. Parentage is mainly a woman's question.

The community would thus gradually obtain control over the production of its own all-important social material, without which control it is simply impossible to get rid of the evils of over-population and racial deterioration.

How the individualist who abjures the organisation of society implied by Socialism can have any reasonable hope of the painless equalisation of the birth-rate and death-rate I am at a loss to conceive. Effective Socialism will but establish conditions rendering possible that thorough moral control over the individual which is necessary in order to curb his liberty of evil action. In an improved society we seek socialised freedom—less liberty for bad conduct, more liberty for good conduct and harmless personal action. This is the ideal of Socialism on its ethical side.

Now so far I have taken the measures proposed for restriction of population to include the neo-Malthusian method, viz., artificial checks to conception. It cannot be denied that these checks must make limitation of births much easier for the majority of people. I have shown the futility of the application of even these checks in our present degraded and unorganised society. How much more futile, then, is the suggestion of ultra moralists who enjoin sexual abstinence both within and without marriage! It is difficult to understand their conception of the strength of average human passion. They appear to think it so weak that the widespread illicit intercourse of the sexes and sexual crime must be to their minds without any adequate motive. Such a misconception of human nature renders valueless the

opinions on social reform set forth by these moralists. Professor Geddes and Mr. J. A. Thomson have lately published a generally excellent treatise on "The Evolution of Sex". In it, however, at page 297, this passage occurs: "We would urge, in fact, the necessity of an ethical rather than of a mechanical prudence after marriage, of a temperance recognised to be as binding on husband and wife as chastity on the unmarried." What is meant by the temperance here recommended? Surely it is well-known that the birth of a large family is quite consistent with an extremely sparing and temperate exercise of the procreative function. Temperance has no bearing here. As to consistent celibacy and its counterpart within marriage, these states do not imply "temperance" but total abstinence which is a wholly different matter. But this appeal to people generally for total abstinence from a natural function during all but a very short period of adult life can be regarded only as an ill-considered attempt to mould humanity to an arbitrary pattern of morality which either disregards the essentials of human nature or stigmatises an inalienable function as in some degree unworthy and personally injurious.

We live in an age of artificial methods both in the matter of wresting from nature our sustenance and much that conduces to such comfort as we enjoy, and in the matter of protecting ourselves from the evils that nature may bring upon us. It is true that self-control is necessary to restriction of the birth-rate but this does not involve an intolerable repression of one of the strongest and most social impulses of our nature. Artificial method has already come to our help, and in this scientific age we are not likely to refuse that help, on the contrary, we are sure to use artificial method and make it as effective as possible.