

Book Review

Richard Togman: *Nationalizing Sex: Fertility, Fear, and Power*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. v, 285.)

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The history of national concern about (more or less) babies is the fascinating topic of this book. If the personal is political, then the very intimate can be incredibly so. Fertility concerns invoke national wrestling matches over immigration, culture, race, money, power, war, boundaries, control, famine, faith, and fear—proving that even historical demography can make for an engaging read. While demographers are famous for making sex, birth, illness, and death far more boring to read about than to experience, author Richard Togman proves himself an exception. He masterfully details how childbearing—long a very private matter—has, at various times and in rather diverse ways, become a matter of statecraft. Indeed, in spite of the tall order of detailing the genesis, implementation, and predictable results of so many policies, *Nationalizing Sex* is remarkably accessible, interesting, and well written, covering a vast expanse of time and geography. Along the way, Togman provides a treasure trove of quotes and fascinating anecdotes. Who knew that Mahatma Gandhi debated Margaret Sanger on contraception? Or that the Ford Foundation underwrote research on a contraceptive aerial mist to be delivered by crop-duster aircraft?

“Natalism,” the author defines up front, is about “attempts to manipulate the gross numbers of a population through fertility control” (1). It is about the quantity, not the quality, of a population. But what exactly is a population? We misspeak about it as if it were a person “with character traits, habits, and behaviors,” Togman observes (6). A population is an abstraction, he reminds us—a convenient fiction of sorts. This makes for trouble when national leaders press particular fertility goals, because they attempt to grow or curb a population by attending to their collective citizenry, instead of to the diverse realities of persons (within relationships in a narrow range of childbearing age) making unique decisions based on criteria and incentives that typically have little or nothing to do with governmental interests. By contrast, these “micro foundations of fertility rates and natural population

growth," things like religious ideals, economic concerns, social norms, and family expectations, have everything to do with fertility decisions (6). Yet knowledge of this microlevel, which holds the only hope of any real effect, remains elusive to national governments, either from lack of interest or misunderstanding. All but the most invasive nations fear to tread there.

Because of this misalignment, fertility policy is almost always clunky—a blunt tool when what would be more effective is targeted incentives. However, those who wish to have children do not often require an incentive, while those for whom the incentive is welcome tend to regard it as too modest. Targeted incentives, however, are unpalatable—even while today's media firms profit from such narrow marketing. Hence, clunky prevails (and then fails).

Togman painstakingly details ineffective policies and untold amounts of wasted cash in pursuit of a (Western) state ideal. This is the heart of the book, featuring chapters that explore five models or "frames" of thought about fertility policy. The pronatalist mercantilist and neomercantilist, the antinatalist Malthusian and modernization, and the laissez-faire frames generally map onto modern world history—which are how the chapters are actually distinguished. Togman focuses on the era from the eighteenth century up to the present. Why? Because "this period marks the beginning of scientifically rational accounts of the population and the origins of modern efforts to control fertility" (20). Five countries are explored as in-depth case studies: France, Germany, Russia, India, and China.

The book repeatedly (yet deftly) demonstrates a central claim—that the same frames and accompanying discourses have been, are, and will be utilized to motivate government action in vastly different regimes, places, and contexts. And directions shift, sometimes rapidly. The Malthusian burden of an extra mouth can quickly become a mercantilist treasure of an extra future soldier, while objective facts—fertility rates and change—may remain the same. The author's treatment of early Soviet fertility policy highlights these mixed and shifting motivations about natal policy (67–69). Bolshevik family law was intentionally radical for its era, ushering in a sexual revolution a full five decades before the more famous one with which readers are more familiar. The economic foundations of monogamy would disappear, hoped Friedrich Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Property and the State*. The first sixteen years following the Russian Revolution offered a natural experiment about what happens when a nation seeks to unravel not just marriage, but a host of sexual norms.

It was not pretty. By 1936, most of the new laws had been undone by Stalin. The experiment with free and open access to abortion was over—outlawed. By 1944, divorce had become complicated and beyond the capacity of most couples. Material advantages were provided to mothers who had at least five children. Togman characterizes Stalin's motivations as basic pronatalism. In reality, the grand vision of a Soviet communist utopia required far more

discipline and sacrifice than egalitarian laws about free unions could ever hope to motivate.

No matter the discourse, the regime, the locale, or the historical context, Togman's refrain remains the same: governmental policies and efforts have been a failure because they have focused on the "population" without understanding its components (and their interests and motivations). There is, he explains in detail, a glaring exception to this: China. Its draconian antinatalist policy of the last half century has been an unusual "success," in no small part the result of extreme coercion and tight surveillance. That story, of course, is barely history. Although the policy has recently been formally loosened, its grip on the mind is tight. Chinese fertility continues to slip.

Sixty years ago, President Eisenhower pressed hard for population-control initiatives, arguing not that it was on the right side of history but that that history would condemn us if we failed in this capacity. History, it turns out, is simply indifferent to whether nations seek to curb or create more births. Togman's book details how national intervention into bedroom productions has ranged from modestly incentivizing births to severely restricting them, but almost all such efforts consistently fail to accomplish their goals. Policy, Togman maintains, is far better at altering the timing of births than the overall number of them. That the labors of so many progressive and conservative acquaintances of mine in this sector may be in vain would be, for them, a tough pill to swallow. But Togman does not perceive his job as anything but leveling with the reader. Indeed, he states his intention to remain neutral and present the history objectively, and he does an admirable job of it. Readers are able to retain their own sentiments and commitments while Togman teaches. In *Nationalizing Sex*, he does so masterfully.

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