

# The Fear of Population Decline

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# Demography and Internal Politics, 1870-1945

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## THE EUGENIC APPROACH TO POPULATION DECLINE

When we turn to the subject of population decline as a theme in discussions of the internal politics of Western Europe and the United States in the period 1870-1945, we see two related but not identical fears expressed by a heterogeneous group of writers, scientists, and politicians. The first is anxiety over the eclipse of elites by the more prolific masses. The second is a worry over "pollution" of an indigenous population by immigration and/or miscegenation.

Most defenders of social inequality in Europe and America in this period shared a number of simple and widely held assumptions about racial characteristics and racial superiority, although not all those holding such racial views supported social inequalities. The reason is that the anti-elitism of some fascist movements distinguishes their outlook from that of some of their conservative allies. The Nazis, for example, argued that Aryan features and pure blood were the essence of the *Volk* (or nation) as a whole, and not the monopoly of only one class. For this and for other reasons, the place of traditional elites in the Nazi state was precarious, as many of them recognized sadly and belatedly. Fears of social submergence and racial decline frequently coincided, but were not fused.

This is not to deny the affinity between some sources of fascist thinking and the views of exponents of the fear of population decline, taken as the decline of elites. Consider a study of heredity and society written in 1912 by two English eugenicists, the Cam-

bridge economist Dampier Whetham and his wife, Dorothy. They had just read Houston Stewart Chamberlain's book, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, which later became a minor classic of Nazi "thought." At a time of unprecedented industrial unrest in Britain, and during the controversy over the restriction of the veto power of the House of Lords, the Whethams (1912) found Chamberlain's message to be of profound importance. What had to be done in Britain as in Germany was to demonstrate that

The great things of the world are accomplished by individuals who have a strong personality and by races which have a strong race-personality. Within the nation itself, the best work is done by groups or sections of the people that are easily recognized and have strongly marked characteristics. We have shown reason to believe that this differentiation of type into so-called classes, which is found in all successful national evolution, is essential to the maintenance of progress. (pp. 69-70)

But something had gone wrong in the development of class society in Britain: the superior "stocks" were not reproducing themselves. In consequence,

Great men are scarce; the group personality is becoming indistinct and the personality of the race by which success was attained in the past, is therefore on the wane, while the forces of chaos are once more being manufactured in our midst, ready to break loose and destroy the civilization when the higher types are no longer sufficient in numbers and effectiveness to guide, control or subdue them. (p. 70)

Here we can savor the dark pessimism of elites under siege, and see encapsulated that mixture of fear of social unrest and a loss of mastery that marked the writings of many Europeans concerned with population decline.

A belief in demographic determinism suffuses the writings of many of those who addressed the problem of population decline in the period 1870-1945. The relatively lower fertility of elites compared to that of working people provided many with a useful account of the genesis of social instability, and even on occasion, of the downfall of "civilization." If contraception was a key subversive agent in contemporary history, then one could dispense with arguments about the destabilizing effects of poverty and inequality. Hence, for such writers, a simple form of demographic analysis could completely and conveniently displace social analysis.

#### *Positive Eugenics*

The original meaning of the term *eugenics* was the science of race improvement. In the late nineteenth century, the term *race* was used frequently as a synonym for nation; "the British race" and "the European race" are examples. It was also used in the way we take for granted today, that is, to describe a population of a distinct physical type or color of skin—"the Caucasian race" or "the Mongoloid race." Because of the highly charged character of the language of race today, it is perhaps best to be more precise than were the eugenicists in delineating their subject, and therefore we define it as the science of the improvement of the genetic stock of the human population or of subgroups within it. As such it constitutes a body of ideas and proposals of a positive kind, encouraging or stimulating the propagation of individuals and groups deemed to contribute to the well-being of the community, as well as a set of notions of a negative kind, restricting or eliminating the propagation of characteristics, individuals, or groups deemed detrimental.

Much has been written about the history of eugenics, largely because of the shadow cast on it by the experience of National Socialism in Germany (See Haller, 1963; Schneider, 1982, pp. 268-291; Searle, 1978). It is important to note, though, that many supporters of eugenics found both Nazism and what we understand today as racism to be completely repugnant, and that many politicians, scientists, and men of letters who were profoundly anti-fascist addressed themselves to the problem of race hygiene in the period under review. We are not dealing with the lunatic fringe when we survey the history of eugenics in Europe and America, and it is only by stripping away the categories of our present more egalitarian culture that we can appreciate the earlier meaning of eugenics and the extent to which it provided a language with which to express a fear of population decline.

The quest for ability or genius was a virtual obsession with many European writers in the late nineteenth century. Galton's influential book, entitled *Hereditary Genius*, which was first published in 1869, awakened an interest in the problem of the transmission of ability over time (see Cowan, 1972, pp. 380-412; Forrest, 1974; Galton, 1908). Many saw in this question the most important as-

pect of the decline of fertility. One case in point is the English Roman Catholic physician, J. W. Taylor. In 1906 he wrote of his belief that the "vicious and unnatural habits of the present generation" had led to a dearth of "men of surpassing genius" (p. 226). It is not surprising that Taylor was oblivious of the contemporary existence of Picasso, Freud, or Einstein, but the fact that they were alive at the time throws an ironic light on his conclusion that "our mischievous meddling with great natural forces" (p. 226n) has stripped the world of genius. Taylor believed that supreme ability, as in the cases of Shakespeare, Walter Scott, and John Wesley, occurred mainly in large families.

During the First World War, and in its aftermath, this theme of the demographic sources of the alleged dearth of ability in the modern world was translated into the cult of the "Lost Generation," the remembrance of social elites who fell in the Great War. There was some truth in the claim that the British upper classes suffered disproportionately heavy war losses, largely on account of the slaughter of the officer corps in the trenches. But since the vast majority of men who died in uniform were working-class, it is clear that the literary reverie for the young poets, philosophers, and politicians who fell in Flanders fields really arose out of fears of the decline of ability in European society. According to some, war losses helped complete the work that birth control had already begun, that is, to strip the European world of talent and thereby to place another nail in the coffin of European supremacy and that of its privileged classes (Winter, 1976, pp. 449-466).

Consider this comment made in 1917 by a correspondent in a British medical journal, the *Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*: that one-child privileged families who had lost their only sons in the First World War had been punished for their "loathsome practices," or in other words, for following "the foul teaching of family limitation" (1917, p. 238). Such remarks proliferated in a wide body of literature on the supposed "dysgenic character" of the war. As early as 1914, Dr. Caleb Saleeby provided a visual record of what he believed the war was doing to the race:

Every afternoon when my work is done I go into Hyde Park, and I watch a small portion of Kitchener's Army [of volunteers] drilling, and I compare those splendid young men, everyone of whom I pay homage to in

my heart, with the washouts, dirty drunken, and diseased, whom no recruiting sergeant since time began wanted to look at a second time, lying about in the grass, and I realize the trash is remaining at home and the treasure is going away to be killed. (p. 5)

The very least England could do, he went on, was to protect the issue of the nation's "treasure" by supporting the soldiers' and sailors' wives who were pregnant and thereby were doing "equally good service for England" by giving birth to healthy babies (Saleeby, 1914, p. 5). Perhaps this modern variant of the old adage as to the proper role of women, "Lie back and think of England," can be traced, like so many other things, to the First World War.

Even those who pioneered family planning stressed the need to procreate ability, or in so many words, for the propertied classes to reproduce their own kind. Marie Stopes, the sponsor of the first birth control clinics in Britain, told the National Birth-rate Commission that she wanted to increase the fertility of the "better classes" because "in our class the children of the last twenty-five years are mentally and physically superior to those of the poorer and more thriftless of the working classes" (Marchant, 1920b, pp. 253, 255). The same opinion was voiced a few years later by Lucien March, president of the French Eugenics Society. He told an International Eugenics Conference in New York that "innate qualities" are greater in wealthier families than in poorer families (March, 1923, pp. 249-250). In 1930 a distinguished British biologist, R. A. Fisher (1930), added his weight to the argument that "a number of qualities of moral character" show "a relative concentration in the more prosperous strata of existing populations" (pp. 262-263). Leonard Darwin, fourth son of Charles Darwin, and president of the Eugenics Education Society, spent 30 years of his life propagating this idea (Darwin, 1926, p. 327; 1928, p. 67). C. P. Blacker, whose views we have cited above, made the similar claim in 1934 that those who "rise in the social scale exhibit socially valuable qualities which are largely innate and at least partly hereditary" (p. 74). Two years previously, a noted German racial biologist, Eugen Fischer, had made the same assertion. The "catastrophic fall" in European fertility was bound, in his view, to "reduce considerably the number of stocks which carry on to posterity the national heritage" (Fischer, 1931, p. 105).

### 3. DEMOGRAPHY AND INTERNAL POLITICS, 1870-1945

#### *Negative Eugenics*

The social prejudice in favor of elites found in writings on population decline was frequently turned against their supposed inferiors. The major claim here was that the "inferiority" of specified social groups was a reflection of their innate character. Left to reproduce on their own, such people would propagate their particular disability, and on account of their high fertility, they were bound to pose a serious threat to the future well-being of the entire community. It is at this point that some, but by no means all, eugenic thought took on a racist character.

#### *Eugenics and Race*

The historical experience of different countries determined whether eugenics developed primarily as a language of racial conflict or as a language of class conflict. This we can see most clearly in a brief examination of some currents in American eugenics. In the United States the legacy of slavery and the huge influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe who arrived in the United States during the period 1880-1914 presented problems that Europeans never had to face in the same form. It is true, though, that the European fear of the lower orders had a partial equivalence in the American anxiety over the un-American ideas and habits that aliens supposedly brought with them from an older and more degenerate world. Given the higher fertility rates among most immigrants compared to that of native Americans, fears about the future demise of the American national character were frequently expressed. Such anxieties helped launch some of the earliest work in American demography (Notestein, 1982, p. 652).

After the Russian Revolution, xenophobia and the defense of the "American way of life" took on a particularly shrill character, which was reflected in many discussions of population questions. Consider the welcoming remarks of Henry Fairfield Osborn of the American Museum of Natural History to delegates to the 1921 International Eugenics Congress. He told his audience that "in certain parts of Europe the worst elements of society have gained the ascendancy and threaten the destruction of the best" (Osborn, 1923, p. 1). With proper immigration controls no such threat would materialize in America, he presumed. Many of the other delegates

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expressed a greater interest in the demographic and eugenic significance of the racial question in America. An exhibition was prepared for the congress, many of the displays of which presented "scientific proof" of the innate inferiority of Negroes.<sup>1</sup>

Such ideas were pervasive at this time, as we can judge in the remarks of an academic writer on population questions, Edward M. East of Harvard. In 1920 this scholar advanced the "theory" that

The negro is a happy-go-lucky child, naturally expansive under simple conditions; oppressed by the restriction of civilization. He accepts his limitations; indeed he is rather glad to have them. Only when there is white blood in his veins does he cry out against the supposed injustice of his condition. (pp. 621-622)

The particular mulatto he may have had in mind was the distinguished black scholar at Harvard, W. E. B. Dubois (1920, p. 621). East seems to have been unaware that very few blacks in America were of what he called pure African stock. But to have admitted that inconvenient fact would have been to face the consequences of his own theory—the inevitability of racial protest and racial conflict.

The literature on race produced in Germany was vast and, unfortunately, is all too well known. We shall discuss below the impact on the eugenics movement of Nazi ideas on the sterilization of the unfit. In this context, though, it is important to note how many non-German writers on eugenics were imbued with strains of prejudice strikingly similar to those the Nazis were later to immortalize and thereby to discredit. In phrases that would have warmed the heart of Alfred Rosenberg, the chief Nazi race theorist, the Liverpool physician Rentoul warned of the "monstrosities" produced by racial intermarriage and of the criminal sexual appetites of the black man (1906, p. 31). Somewhat less hysterical, but also infused with prejudice and ignorance were the remarks of Caleb Saleeby that "the child of the lower races degenerates at puberty" (1921, p. 61). He followed this statement with a surre-

<sup>1</sup>See the booklet printed for the occasion, *The Second International Exhibition of Eugenics* (Baltimore, 1923, p. 108) on the less developed "brain part" of Negro skulls, and p. 120 on Negro "mental fatigue". Anti-immigrant displays were also presented.

alistic description of nonwhite cranial physiology. It is fortunate that these physicians were unlikely to encounter blacks in need of medical attention in England. In another context, Saleeby (1909) ridiculed the work of those who "would almost have us believe that the negro is mentally and morally the equal of the Caucasian" (p. xi). Julian S. Huxley held similar views. He opposed miscegenation on the grounds that society had to avoid a "large proportion of disharmonic combinations" (whatever they were; 1921, p. 21). Lucien March believed that the French faced just such a fate as a result of the immigration of "unassimilable races . . . which will furnish quickly undesirable elements," and which, because of higher fertility, will quickly spread throughout the population (1923, p. 251).

These statements are but the tip of the iceberg of racial prejudice in Europe in the period under review, and it would have been surprising if discussion of population questions developed independently of it. But in Europe, in contrast to the United States, anxiety over the future of society pointed more to questions of class than to questions of race. Consider these remarks made by a French anthropologist, Georges Vacher de Lapouge, to the 1923 International Eugenics Congress:

The time has come when man must choose whether he will be a demigod or whether he will turn to barbarism. And this is not a figure of speech. The less well endowed classes, the residue of "uncivilizables", reproach their superiors for having created a civilization which multiplies their desires beyond the possibility of their satisfaction. An immense movement has started among races and inferior classes, and this movement which can be turned against the white race, is turned also against intellectually superior elements and against civilization itself. Class war is the real race war. (p. 6)

#### *Eugenics and Social Class*

Notions such as these were largely a reworking of nineteenth-century fears about the explosive potential of urban populations. Many writers prepared the way for eugenics by decrying the "dangerous classes" of Paris or the submerged denizens of "Outcast London" (Chevalier, 1966; Jones, 1971; Rentoul, 1906, p. xii). The development of statistical procedures in the later Victorian period made possible the measurement of this pool of apparent disorder

and of many of the supposed links between fertility and social instability or racial decline. In 1906 one of Karl Pearson's associates at University College, London produced a learned study of fertility and social status, the purpose of which was to demonstrate the "very close relationship between undesirable social status and a high birth rate" (Heron, 1906, p. 21). General laborers and other "mentally and physically feebler stocks" were reproducing themselves at much greater rates than were professionals and other "abler and more capable stocks" (p. 21).

To uncover the true statistical picture of differential fertility, the superintendent of statistics for England and Wales, T. H. Stevenson, conducted a census of fertility in 1911. To help process the data, he constructed a taxonomy of social classes, from Class I (professionals) through intermediate grades to Class V (unskilled workers). Special classes were designated for agricultural laborers, miners, and textile workers, whose fertility patterns were believed to be significantly different from those of other manual workers. The results of this analysis appeared after the First World War and supported the view that poverty and high fertility were positively correlated. Although no subsequent census of fertility was conducted in Britain until after the Second World War, Stevenson's categories of social stratification, which are highly problematic, have survived to this day, as an offshoot of concern over population decline.<sup>2</sup>

As we have seen, before the First World War, many observers of social affairs in Britain were convinced that among the residuum of the urban poor lived many who were congenitally unfit. The Liverpool physician Rentoul was definitely not alone in his belief that people who lived in slums were predisposed hereditarily to do so (Rentoul, 1906, p. 16). Together with agricultural laborers, unskilled workers were seen as carriers of feeble-mindedness, the expense of the public care of which in Poor Law institutions was a chronic source of concern among middle-class social workers and philanthropists. To some eugenicists, though, the feeble-minded were "the kith and kin of the epileptic, the insane and mentally unstable, the criminal, the chronic pauper and unemployable

<sup>2</sup>See Szreter (1984) for the full story of the formulation of Stevenson's categorization of social classes.

classes," the support of whom "must impede national advance" (Tredgold, 1910, pp. 720-721).

This identification of a cluster of "degenerates" whose fertility was higher than that of the nondegenerate population characterizes many British discussions of deviance in this period. Referring again to the feeble-minded, Leonard Huxley claimed in 1926 that the country could not "preserve and multiply these weaklings in mind who make the nation incurably below C-3", that is, below the minimum standard for induction into the Army (p. 38). Public assistance of any kind, Leonard Darwin (1917) wrote, while soothing to humanitarian sentiment, was dysgenic. The strength of such "civilizing influences" in the past helped to "explain why ancient civilizations have often died out" (p. 62). At the height of the world economic crisis, R. Ruggles Gates, a noted botanist, told the Centenary Meeting of the British Association that public financial support for working-class nutrition and health was not in the national interest. "The view that populations exist as blind mouths to be fed and educated regardless of their racial worth," he argued, "is all too prevalent and will lead us along the road to racial decay" (Gates, 1932a, p. 307; see also his article in the same source for his indictment of the wastefulness of social welfare provision).

As we have already seen in Chapter 2, the themes of urban degeneracy and hereditary insanity were prominent in turn-of-the-century French literature, such as in the novels of Zola and the works of Brioux and of other French writers. These concerns were at the heart of the eugenics movement, which in France had a particularly wide appeal among scientists still wedded to the Lamarckian tradition. It is this feature of their thought that separates much French eugenic writing from the more radical positions of men like Vacher de Lapouge. For a Lamarckian, the deprivation of poverty, like the "taint" of alcoholism, tuberculosis, or venereal disease, could be passed on to the offspring of the poor or diseased. But there was an inherent optimism in this position, since the removal of the children of the poor to a rural environment or the improvement in urban conditions that produced their "degeneracy" would suffice virtually immediately to cure it (Schneider, 1982, *passim*).

For this reason, and because of the hostility of the Catholic

Church to interference with reproduction, relatively few French eugenicists went to the extremes of Vacher de Lapouge, whose curious mixture of antisemitism, anthropology, and anarchism would have been more at home in a Nazi institute of race hygiene than in a quiet French provincial university. (For a survey of the ideas of Vacher de Lapouge, see Guiral, 1977, pp. 34-47, and Lapouge, 1899.) There were some echoes of his work in the writings of René Martial, a medical anthropologist in the faculty of medicine in Paris in the 1930s, who explicitly linked the problem of degeneracy to the decline in the birth rate. He told Parisian medical students in 1938 that, since fecundity is proportional to the purity of the race and the stability of "local crossings" (Martial, 1938, p. 123), immigration and even interregional intermarriage had to be stopped. Here was an ingenious explanation of the decline of French fertility. Like his British counterparts, but long after many of them had begun to feel embarrassed about the proximity of their ideas to those of the Nazis, Martial also advocated the sterilization of epileptics, alcoholics, and the mentally ill (Martial, 1939, pp. 249, 251, 290; see also Martial, 1938).

In Germany, eugenics became part of a cult of race improvement and race mysticism institutionalized after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. Jews were stigmatized as social pariahs from the moment Hitler took over as chancellor, but it is important to remember that many non-Jewish Germans suffering from disabilities or diseases deemed hereditary were also placed at risk by Hitler's political success. Well before the "final solution of the Jewish problem" had emerged from the dark recesses of the Nazi High Command, much discussion and planning took place about the need for compulsory sterilization, and later for the euthanasia, of the undesirable and the unfit.

Interest in the subject of genetic hygiene or "race improvement" antedated the creation of the National Socialist party. In 1904 the *Journal of Racial and Social Biology* was founded. Its editor, Alfred Ploetz, was also the founder of the Society for Racial Hygiene, which was modeled after the English Eugenics Education Society. He became prominent in this field in part because of his entry in an essay contest sponsored by Alfred Krupp on the question, "What can we learn from the principles of Darwinism for application to domestic political development of the laws of the state?"

Over the years, he and his journal propagated eugenic ideas supporting the sterilization of the unfit. It should cause no surprise to learn that he and other leading German social biologists joined the Nazi party and worked to enact the law of 28 June 1933 for the sterilization of those bearing hereditary disease. It is in the context of this legislation that we must place the praise of the elderly Karl Pearson, the great statistician and eugenicist, for Hitler's effort to rebuild the German nation (Mosse, 1978, pp. 76-93).

The legislation of 1933, followed by the Nuremberg laws and other pieces of Nazi policy, caused a breach in the international eugenics movement from which it never recovered. In the report of the conference of international eugenic organizations, which met in Zurich in 1934, we can see the extent to which eugenicists drew back from negative eugenics as practiced by the Nazis. The major discussion centered around the new sterilization laws, which to some delegates from France and the Low Countries seemed to violate the humanitarianism that they believed was at the heart of eugenics. For example, to sterilize those who suffered from Huntington's chorea would eliminate both their offspring who would have had the disease and those who would have been free of it. To some delegates, this approximated a massacre of the innocents, which was intrinsically objectionable, but doubly so at a time of "diminishing natality."

The German delegates, of course, would have none of this. Falk Ruttko, director of the committee of public health of the Ministry of the Interior, insisted that "everything which can be harmful to the future of the German people must be extirpated by force" (Schreiber, 1935, p. 87). Dr. Arthur Gutt, director of the Ministry of the Interior, explained the new legislation to the delegates, and Dr. Karl Astel provided statistics relating to compulsory sterilization in Thuringia. In that one area alone, encompassing a population of 1.6 million people, 1234 compulsory sterilizations took place between 1 January and 1 July 1934 (Schreiber, 1935, pp. 78-92).

Many eugenicists were not averse to considering the case for voluntary sterilization of people with hereditary diseases. But most of those associated with eugenics in Britain and France were deeply troubled by Nazi racial policies, which, they realized, exposed the darker side of their movement. To many eugenicists, German de-

velopments meant the parting of the ways. One meeting of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, founded in 1930 by the American demographer Raymond Pearl and the Italian demographer Corrado Gini, was moved from Rome to London to prevent Gini from exploiting it as propaganda for fascism. For similar reasons, American demographers boycotted another meeting of the organization held in Berlin (Notestein, 1982, p. 674).

Indeed, even the term *eugenics* came to carry unsavory connotations in the period of the Second World War and after. This was as true in the United States as it was elsewhere. It is important to note, though, that in 1933, legislation permitting the sterilization of the unfit was on the statute books of 30 states of the Union, and that over 8000 people were sterilized in the years 1928-1933 alone (Schreiber, 1935, pp. 83-84). If Hitler can be said to have accomplished anything, it was to undermine the concept of race improvement that underlay these and many similar measures adopted in a number of countries in the period 1900-1933.

The fact that some eugenicists wound up as fellow travelers of the Nazis should not lead us to conclude that eugenics was a proto-fascist movement. It is better to see eugenics as a movement of middle-class professionals and men of property who found a biological language to express their fears of revolution or proletarianization, either of which constituted in their eyes the degeneration of the race. This is why the eugenicist and Oxford philosopher F. C. S. Schiller openly expressed his sympathies with fascism, as the most effective antisocialist weapon. Socialism to him was "an unintelligent attempt to equalize human conditions without regard to mind or capacity, which is inspired mainly by envy and sentimentalism" (Schiller, 1932, p. 8; see also, Abel, 1955, pp. 146-147).

At least on the question of socialism and on the need to improve the quality of the race, fascism seemed to be speaking sense to many eugenicists. In addition, many Catholics, while vigorously opposing eugenic ideas in any form, still found attractive the pronatalist attitudes of virtually all fascist leaders. Furthermore, Mussolini's Italy and Franco's Spain had granted an honored place to the church which, after the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Civil War, had to face what conservatives saw as a ferocious onslaught from the atheistic armies of the left. To those whose Ca-



tholicism underpinned both their conservatism and their pronatalism, perhaps all was not evil in the fascist camp. Halliday Sutherland, whose early medical practice had begun in Spain in 1908, was invited back by the Franco government in 1946. By then he was a well-known crusader against contraception. His account of his visit included a defense of Franco and a sympathetic appraisal of the ideology of Antonio Primo de Rivera, the founder of the Falangist movement (Sutherland, 1936, pp. 235-236; 1947, pp. 83, 92-93). The fascist "solution" to problems of internal social instability clearly had an appeal to many exponents of the fear of population decline.

### SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND POPULATION DECLINE

What is more surprising is how widely shared by the left was concern about population decline in Europe in this period. What could socialists and reforming liberals have had in common with the views of conservative eugenicists such as Dr. C. M. Burns, who in a book on infant and maternal mortality, called for a reduction of "the flotsam in future generations" not by environmental improvement but by better breeding? After all, she noted, "The black spot cannot be 'bred out' of a terrier's litter by merely giving the mother a good kennel" (Burns, 1942, p. 246). It is obvious that this sort of negative eugenics was repugnant to men and women of the left, many of whom were nonetheless prepared to argue that aggregate population growth had to be kept up in order to assure the future of social democracy in Europe.

Catholic socialists on the continent had no difficulty in reconciling their pronatalism with their commitment to the liberation of the working class from the fetters of unbridled capitalism. Many followed Marx in excoriating Malthus as the pessimistic ideologist of the selfish bourgeoisie, a man who blamed the poor for their poverty and opposed state welfare as counterproductive. This is one of the themes of the scholarly work of the Italian radical politician and economist, Francesco S. Nitti, who later became prime minister after the First World War and received a Nobel Peace Prize for his work on behalf of the League of Nations. In a book published in 1893 and translated into French, German, and English on

*Population and the Social System*, he developed the idea that a socialist society would be one with a fertility rate higher than that of a capitalist society, because socialism grew out of a commitment to collective rather than individual morality. This view was based on the assertion "that every system of morality which leads to individualism is contrary to a great fecundity of race, and that, on the other hand, every system of morality, which has as a fundamental principal social solidarity and mutual assistance is favourable to a large birth rate" (Nitti, 1894, p. 124). We have already cited (Chapter 2) similar pronatalist sentiments of French commentators of Republican sympathies, such as Arsène Dumont and Émile Zola. Their writing contributed to a wide body of opinion on the European left that decried a slowdown in rates of population growth as a reflection of the decadence of capitalism.

Others saw a decline in fertility as an obstacle to social reform. One of the most influential figures in the field of social administration in Britain was the socialist academic Richard Titmuss. In a book written jointly with Kathleen Titmuss, we may find one version of this argument. They asserted in 1942 that a slow-growing population is more interested in security than in reform. A declining rate of population growth, therefore, meant that "society will lose the mental attitude that is essential for social progress." They admitted that an aging population was one "ripe [in] experience and Victorian memories," but added these rhetorical questions: "Are these the gifts we require to build a New Social Order? If this age structure explains in part our shortcomings during the past ten years, will it not also shape our future; a cautious, timid, benevolent" future, perhaps, but not a socialist future (Titmuss and Titmuss, 1942, p. 47)?

The Titmusses formulated a second aspect of the socialist analysis of population decline. On the assumption that "man's attitude to the reproduction of his own species is the key to all other problems" (Titmuss and Titmuss, 1942, p. 31), they concluded that declining fertility was an indictment of capitalism on the part of people who did not want to bring children into the world it had created. The ethical socialism of R. H. Tawney is writ large in the view that "so long as men, twisting, turning, fighting, and rolling in an economic society, in which they are saturated with class thinking, are forced to compete one with another, so long will they

refuse to reproduce themselves" (Titmuss and Titmuss, 1942, p. 116).

The social biologist Lancelot Hogben, who like Titmuss and Tawney taught at the London School of Economics, concurred. "The population crisis to which urban civilization is now heading," he wrote in 1936, "is the biological proof of its inadequacy" (Hogben, 1936, p. 50). Erid Charles, the author of *The Menace of Underpopulation*, and Hogben's wife, wrote similarly that the "ultimate condemnation" of capitalism "is that it has now ceased to be able to accommodate the biological machinery by which any form of society can be perpetuated" (1936, p. 223). The assumption of many of these writers, with the exception of the iconoclastic and agnostic Hogben, was that a socialist society would be, by definition, a more fertile one.

Liberal economists avoided similar indictments of capitalism, but many of them were worried about the consequences of the slowdown of population growth rates. J. A. Hobson, a member of the National Birth-rate Commission, found the discussion of population decline to be perfectly compatible with his underconsumptionist theories (Marchant, 1920b). John Maynard Keynes, in the late 1930s, advanced the view that a recovery of fertility rates would help stimulate aggregate demand and replenish sources of capital (Keynes, 1937, pp. 13-17). Sir William Beveridge, his biographer tells us, derived his concern about the question of fertility from three sources:

firstly, from a fear of the ultimate collapse of the most "advanced" races; secondly, from a desire to avoid producing a society over-loaded with old people; and thirdly, from a belief that birth control was mainly practiced by the most "responsible" sections of society and might therefore be harming the "national stock". (Harris, 1977, p. 342)

These sentiments were enshrined in the Beveridge Report of 1942, out of which came much of the momentum leading to the social reforms of the later 1940s. Therein maternal welfare provision and family allowances were defended on the grounds that women "have vital work to do in insuring the adequate continuance of the British race and British ideals in the world (Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services, p. 53).

Beveridge's ideas on population questions bring out many of the

reasons why social reformers' fears of population decline resembled those of their political enemies. First, let us take two of the most prominent exponents of these views, Beveridge, the Liberal, and Sidney Webb, the Fabian bureaucrat par excellence. Both were strongly influenced both by positivism and by the social biology of Francis Galton. To them fertility was a social fact whose laws could be ascertained by appropriate study. The science of population dynamics was bound to have an attraction for them, as it did for commentators of very different political views. Second, Beveridge and Webb epitomized in their work and thought a form of bureaucratic collectivism that coincided at many points. To those who shared their administrative cast of mind, fertility was but one aspect of human behavior that, like most others, could be and ought to be regulated in the national interest. Third, Webb's form of Fabianism was the doctrine of professional men and women who had relatively little direct contact with the working class, and who at times expressed strong disapproval of the "residuum," as an excrescence that had to be swept away. Both Webb, the Fabian, and Beveridge, the Liberal, believed that "The 'survival of the fittest' in an environment unfavourable to progress may . . . mean the survival of the lowest parasite" (Webb, 1910, pp. 235-237 as cited in Freedman, 1979, p. 647). Consequently, Webb claimed that "it is our business, as eugenicists, deliberately to manipulate the environment so that the survivors may be of the type which we regard as the highest" (p. 647).

Fourth, both Beveridge and Webb were consummate opportunists who used the specter of population decline to inspire or frighten politicians who needed a reason to set reforms in motion. A mixture of philanthropy and patriotism, fueled by concern over population growth, did much to advance the cause of welfare legislation in Western Europe in this century. In Sweden many policy initiatives in the 1930s and after grew out of the commitment stated by Alva Myrdal in 1941: "When the population fails to regenerate itself, the problem of how the human material may be preserved and improved becomes urgent" (Kalvemark, 1980, p. 16).<sup>3</sup> In campaigns on behalf of infant and maternal health in both France and Britain, we can see the co-mingling of strange bedfellows whose

<sup>3</sup>We are grateful to Dr. Philip Ogden for drawing this reference to our attention.

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only idea in common was anxiety over fertility limitation. Similarly, the call for free education in the interwar years in Britain was backed up by the argument that high educational costs for parents were in large part responsible for "the toll . . . which is at present extracted from our birth-rate" (Leybourne and White, 1940, p. 324). Demographic arguments once again came in handy in struggles for social reform.

Finally, the social democratic advocacy of the fear of population decline makes sense as an expression of the deep patriotism of the Western European left. The national consciousness of the French left drew on the tradition of the *levée en masse* (call to arms) of the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods and of the heroic resistance of the Paris Commune to enemies foreign and domestic. The force of *union sacrée* was felt in the surge of mass enthusiasm for war in August 1914. In Britain the call for the defense of King and Country drew the same overwhelming response.

Working-class patriotism did not abate in the interwar years. In this period, too, it was with some justification that socialists in Britain identified the future of their cause with the future of their nation. Since social democracy had collapsed everywhere else in Europe between 1919 and 1940, its existence would be assured, many believed, only if Britain remained healthy and secure. For this reason, men and women on the left believed they had cause for concern over declining rates of population growth that were, in their view, incompatible with national vitality and, if continued, a threat to national survival itself.