

THE PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION

MARGARET SANGER*

To Alice Drysdale Vickery

Whose prophetic vision of liberated womanhood has been an inspiration

“I dream of a world in which the spirits of women are flames stronger than fire, a world in which modesty has become courage and yet remains modesty, a world in which women are as unlike men as ever they were in the world I sought to destroy, a world in which women shine with a loveliness of self-revelation as enchanting as ever the old legends told, and yet a world which would immeasurably transcend the old world in the self-sacrificing passion of human service. I have dreamed of that world ever since I began to dream at all.”

Havelock Ellis

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INTRODUCTION

Birth control, Mrs. Sanger claims, and claims rightly, to be a question of fundamental importance at the present time. I do not know how far one is justified in calling it the pivot or the corner-stone of a progressive civilization. These terms involve a criticism of metaphors that may take us far away from the question in hand. Birth Control is no new thing in human experience, and it has been practised in societies of the most various types and fortunes. But there can be little doubt that at the present time it is a test issue between two widely different interpretations of the word civilization, and of what is good in life and conduct. The way in which men and women range themselves in this controversy is more simply and directly indicative of their general intellectual quality than any other single indication. I do not wish to imply by this that the people who oppose are more or less intellectual than the people who advocate Birth Control, but only that they have fundamentally contrasted general ideas,—that, mentally, they are DIFFERENT. Very simple, very complex, very dull and very brilliant persons may be found in either camp, but all those in either camp have certain attitudes in common which they share with one another, and do not share with those in the other camp.

There have been many definitions of civilization. Civilization is a complexity of count less aspects, and may be validly defined in a great number of relationships. A reader of James Harvey Robinson's MIND IN THE MAKING will find it very reasonable to define a civilization as a system of society-making ideas at issue with reality. Just so far as the system of ideas meets the needs and conditions of survival or is able to adapt itself to the needs and conditions of survival of the society it dominates, so far will that society continue and prosper. We are beginning to realize that in the past and under different conditions from our own, societies have existed with systems of ideas and with methods of thought very widely contrasting with what we should consider right and sane to-day. The extraordinary neolithic civilizations of the American continent that flourished before the coming of the Europeans, seem to have got along with concepts that involved pedantries and cruelties and a kind of systematic unreason, which find their closest parallels to-day in the art and writings of certain types of lunatic. There are collections of drawings from English and American asylums extraordinarily parallel

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in their spirit and quality with the Maya inscriptions of Central America. Yet these neolithic American societies got along for hundreds and perhaps thousands of years. they respected seed-time and harvest, they bred and they maintained a grotesque and terrible order. And they produced quite beautiful works of art. Yet their surplus of population was disposed of by an organization of sacrificial slaughter unparalleled in the records of mankind. Many of the institutions that seemed most normal and respectable to them, filled the invading Europeans with perplexity and horror.

When we realize clearly this possibility of civilizations being based on very different sets of moral ideas and upon different intellectual methods, we are better able to appreciate the profound significance of the schism in our modern community, which gives us side by side, honest and intelligent people who regard Birth Control as something essentially sweet, sane, clean, desirable and necessary, and others equally honest and with as good a claim to intelligence who regard it as not merely unreasonable and unwholesome, but as intolerable and abominable. We are living not in a simple and complete civilization, but in a conflict of at least two civilizations, based on entirely different fundamental ideas, pursuing different methods and with different aims and ends.

I will call one of these civilizations our Traditional or Authoritative Civilization. It rests upon the thing that is, and upon the thing that has been. It insists upon respect for custom and usage; it discourages criticism and enquiry. It is very ancient and conservative, or, going beyond conservation, it is reactionary. The vehement hostility of many Catholic priests and prelates towards new views of human origins, and new views of moral questions, has led many careless thinkers to identify this old traditional civilization with Christianity, but that identification ignores the strongly revolutionary and initiatory spirit that has always animated Christianity, and is untrue even to the realities of orthodox Catholic teaching. The vituperation of individual Catholics must not be confused with the deliberate doctrines of the Church which have, on the whole, been conspicuously cautious and balanced and sane in these matters. The ideas and practices of the Old Civilization are older and more widespread than and not identifiable with either Christian or

Catholic culture, and it will be a great misfortune if the issues between the Old Civilization and the New are allowed to slip into the deep ruts of religious controversies that are only accidentally and intermittently parallel.

Contrasted with the ancient civilization, with the Traditional disposition, which accepts institutions and moral values as though they were a part of nature, we have what I may call—with an evident bias in its favour—the civilization of enquiry, of experimental knowledge, Creative and Progressive Civilization. The first great outbreak of the spirit of this civilization was in republican Greece;

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the martyrdom of Socrates, the fearless Utopianism of Plato, the ambitious encyclopaedism of Aristotle, mark the dawn of a new courage and a new wilfulness in human affairs. The fear of set limitations, of punitive and restrictive laws imposed by Fate upon human life was visibly fading in human minds. These names mark the first clear realization that to a large extent, and possibly to an illimitable extent, man's moral and social life and his general destiny could be seized upon and controlled by man. But—he must have knowledge. Said the Ancient Civilization—and it says it still through a multitude of vigorous voices and harsh repressive acts: "Let man learn his duty and obey." Says the New Civilization, with ever-increasing confidence: "Let man know, and trust him."

For long ages, the Old Civilization kept the New subordinate, apologetic and ineffective, but for the last two centuries, the New has fought its way to a position of contentious equality. The two go on side by side, jostling upon a thousand issues. The world changes, the conditions of life change rapidly, through that development of organized science which is the natural method of the New Civilization. The old tradition demands that national loyalties and ancient belligerence should continue. The new has produced means of communication that break down the pens and separations of human life upon which nationalist emotion depends. The old tradition insists upon its ancient blood-letting of war; the new knowledge carries that war to undreamt of levels of destruction. The ancient system needed an unrestricted breeding to meet the normal waste of life through war, pestilence, and a multitude of hitherto unpreventable diseases. The new knowledge sweeps away the venerable checks of pestilence and disease, and confronts us with the congestions and explosive dangers of an over-populated world. The old tradition demands a special prolific class doomed to labor and subservience; the new points to mechanism and to scientific organization as a means of escape from this immemorial subjugation. Upon every main issue in life, there is this quarrel between the method of submission and the method of knowledge. More and more do men of science and intelligent people generally realize the hopelessness of pouring new wine into old bottles. More and more clearly do they grasp the significance of the Great Teacher's parable.

The New Civilization is saying to the Old now: "We cannot go on making power for you to spend upon international conflict. You must stop waving flags and bandying insults. You must organize the Peace of the World; you must subdue yourselves to the Federation of all mankind. And we cannot go on giving you health, freedom, enlargement, limitless wealth, if all our gifts to you are to be swamped by an indiscriminate torrent of progeny. We want fewer and better children who can be reared up to their full possibilities in unencumbered

homes, and we cannot make the social life and the world-peace we are determined to make, with the ill-bred, ill-trained swarms of inferior citizens that you inflict upon us." And there at the passionate and
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crucial question, this essential and fundamental question, whether procreation is still to be a superstitious and often disastrous mystery, undertaken in fear and ignorance, reluctantly and under the sway of blind desires, or whether it is to become a deliberate creative act, the two civilizations join issue now. It is a conflict from which it is almost impossible to abstain. Our acts, our way of living, our social tolerance, our very silences will count in this crucial decision between the old and the new.

In a plain and lucid style without any emotional appeals, Mrs. Margaret Sanger sets out the case of the new order against the old. There have been several able books published recently upon the question of Birth Control, from the point of view of a woman's personal life, and from the point of view of married happiness, but I do not think there has been any book as yet, popularly accessible, which presents this matter from the point of view of the public good, and as a necessary step to the further improvement of human life as a whole. I am inclined to think that there has hitherto been rather too much personal emotion spent upon this business and far too little attention given to its broader aspects. Mrs. Sanger with her extraordinary breadth of outlook and the real scientific quality of her mind, has now redressed the balance. She has lifted this question from out of the warm atmosphere of troubled domesticity in which it has hitherto been discussed, to its proper level of a predominantly important human affair.

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THE PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION

CHAPTER I: A New Truth Emerges

Be not ashamed, women, your privilege encloses the
rest, and is the exit of the rest,
You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of
the soul.

Walt Whitman

This book aims to be neither the first word on the tangled problems of human society to-day, nor the last. My aim has been to emphasize, by the use of concrete and challenging examples and neglected facts, the need of a new approach to individual and social problems. Its central
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challenge is that civilization, in any true sense of the word, is based upon the control and guidance of the great natural instinct of Sex. Mastery of this force is possible only through the instrument of Birth Control.

It may be objected that in the following pages I have rushed in where academic scholars have feared to tread, and that as an active propagandist I am lacking in the scholarship and documentary preparation to undertake such a stupendous task. My only defense is that, from my point of view at least, too many are already studying and investigating social problems from without, with a sort of Olympian detachment. And on the other hand, too few of those who are

engaged in this endless war for human betterment have found the time to give to the world those truths not always hidden but practically unquarried, which may be secured only after years of active service. Of late, we have been treated to accounts written by well-meaning ladies and gentlemen who have assumed clever disguises and have gone out to work—for a week or a month—among the proletariat. But can we thus learn anything new of the fundamental problems of working men, working women, working children? Something, perhaps, but not those great central problems of Hunger and Sex. We have been told that only those who themselves have suffered the pangs of starvation can truly understand Hunger. You might come into the closest contact with a starving man; yet, if you were yourself well-fed, no amount of sympathy could give you actual insight into the psychology of his suffering. This suggests an objective and a subjective approach to all social problems. Whatever the weakness of the subjective (or, if you prefer, the feminine) approach, it has at least the virtue that its conclusions are tested by experience. Observation of facts about you, intimate subjective reaction to such facts, generate in your mind certain fundamental convictions,—truths you can ignore no more than you can ignore such truths as come as the fruit of bitter but valuable personal experience.

Regarding myself, I may say that my experience in the course of the past twelve or fifteen years has been of a type to force upon me certain convictions that demand expression. For years I had believed that the solution of all our troubles was to be found in well-defined programmes of political and legislative action. At first, I concentrated my whole attention upon these, only to discover that politicians and law-makers are just as confused and as much at a loss in solving fundamental problems as anyone else. And I am speaking here not so much of the corrupt and ignorant politician as of those idealists and reformers who think that by the ballot society may be led to an earthly paradise. They may honestly desire and intend to do great things. They may positively glow—before election—with enthusiasm at the prospect they imagine political victory may open to them. Time after time, I was struck by the change in their attitude after the briefest enjoyment of this illusory power. Men are elected

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during some wave of reform, let us say, elected to legislate into practical working existence some great ideal. They want to do big things; but a short time in office is enough to show the political idealist that he can accomplish nothing, that his reform must be debased and dragged into the dust, so that even if it becomes enacted, it may be not merely of no benefit, but a positive evil. It is scarcely necessary to emphasize this point. It is an accepted commonplace of American politics. So much of life, so large a part of all our social problems, moreover, remains untouched by political and legislative action. This is an old truth too often ignored by those who plan political campaigns upon the most superficial knowledge of human nature.

My own eyes were opened to the limitations of political action when, as an organizer for a political group in New York, I attended by chance a meeting of women laundry-workers who were on strike. We believed we could help these women with a legislative measure and asked their support. "Oh! that stuff!" exclaimed one of these women. "Don't you know that we women might be dead and buried if we waited for politicians and lawmakers to right our wrongs?" This set

me to thinking—not merely of the immediate problem—but to asking myself how much any male politician could understand of the wrongs inflicted upon poor working women.

I threw the weight of my study and activity into the economic and industrial struggle. Here I discovered men and women fired with the glorious vision of a new world, of a proletarian world emancipated, a Utopian world,—it glowed in romantic colours for the majority of those with whom I came in closest contact. The next step, the immediate step, was another matter, less romantic and too often less encouraging. In their ardor, some of the labor leaders of that period almost convinced us that the millennium was just around the corner. Those were the pre-war days of dramatic strikes. But even when most under the spell of the new vision, the sight of the overburdened wives of the strikers, with their puny babies and their broods of under-fed children, made us stop and think of a neglected factor in the march toward our earthly paradise. It was well enough to ask the poor men workers to carry on the battle against economic injustice. But what results could be expected when they were forced in addition to carry the burden of their ever-growing families? This question loomed large to those of us who came into intimate contact with the women and children. We saw that in the final analysis the real burden of economic and industrial warfare was thrust upon the frail, all-too-frail shoulders of the children, the very babies—the coming generation. In their wan faces, in their undernourished bodies, would be indelibly written the bitter defeat of their parents.

The eloquence of those who led the underpaid and half-starved workers could no longer, for me, at least, ring with conviction. Something more than the purely economic interpretation was involved. The bitter

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struggle for bread, for a home and material comfort, was but one phase of the problem. There was another phase, perhaps even more fundamental, that had been absolutely neglected by the adherents of the new dogmas. That other phase was the driving power of instinct, a power uncontrolled and unnoticed. The great fundamental instinct of sex was expressing itself in these ever-growing broods, in the prosperity of the slum midwife and her colleague the slum undertaker. In spite of all my sympathy with the dream of liberated Labor, I was driven to ask whether this urging power of sex, this deep instinct, was not at least partially responsible, along with industrial injustice, for the widespread misery of the world.

To find an answer to this problem which at that point in my experience I could not solve, I determined to study conditions in Europe. Perhaps there I might discover a new approach, a great illumination. Just before the outbreak of the war, I visited France, Spain, Germany and Great Britain. Everywhere I found the same dogmas and prejudices among labor leaders, the same intense but limited vision, the same insistence upon the purely economic phases of human nature, the same belief that if the problem of hunger were solved, the question of the women and children would take care of itself. In this attitude I discovered, then, what seemed to me to be purely masculine reasoning; and because it was purely masculine, it could at best be but half true. Feminine insight must be brought to bear on all questions; and here, it struck me, the fallacy of the masculine, the all-too-masculine, was brutally exposed. I was encouraged and strengthened in this attitude by the support of certain leaders who had studied human nature and who had reached the same conclusion: that civilization

could not solve the problem of Hunger until it recognized the titanic strength of the sexual instinct. In Spain, I found that Lorenzo Portet, who was carrying on the work of the martyred Francisco Ferrer, had reached this same conclusion. In Italy, Enrico Malatesta, the valiant leader who was after the war to play so dramatic a role, was likewise combating the current dogma of the orthodox Socialists. In Berlin, Rudolph Rocker was engaged in the thankless task of puncturing the articles of faith of the orthodox Marxian religion. It is quite needless to add that these men who had probed beneath the surface of the problem and had diagnosed so much more completely the complex malady of contemporary society were intensely disliked by the superficial theorists of the neo-Marxian School.

The gospel of Marx had, however, been too long and too thoroughly inculcated into the minds of millions of workers in Europe, to be discarded. It is a flattering doctrine, since it teaches the laborer that all the fault is with someone else, that he is the victim of circumstances, and not even a partner in the creation of his own and his child's misery. Not without significance was the additional discovery that I made. I found that the Marxian influence tended to lead workers to believe that, irrespective of the health of the poor mothers, the earning capacity of the wage-earning fathers, or the

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upbringing of the children, increase of the proletarian family was a benefit, not a detriment to the revolutionary movement. The greater the number of hungry mouths, the emptier the stomachs, the more quickly would the "Class War" be precipitated. The greater the increase in population among the proletariat, the greater the incentive to revolution. This may not be sound Marxian theory; but it is the manner in which it is popularly accepted. It is the popular belief, wherever the Marxian influence is strong. This I found especially in England and Scotland. In speaking to groups of dockworkers on strike in Glasgow, and before the communist and co-operative guilds throughout England, I discovered a prevailing opposition to the recognition of sex as a factor in the perpetuation of poverty. The leaders and theorists were immovable in their opposition. But when once I succeeded in breaking through the surface opposition of the rank and file of the workers, I found that they were willing to recognize the power of this neglected factor in their lives.

So central, so fundamental in the life of every man and woman is this problem that they need be taught no elaborate or imposing theory to explain their troubles. To approach their problems by the avenue of sex and reproduction is to reveal at once their fundamental relations to the whole economic and biological structure of society. Their interest is immediately and completely awakened. But always, as I soon discovered, the ideas and habits of thought of these submerged masses have been formed through the Press, the Church, through political institutions, all of which had built up a conspiracy of silence around a subject that is of no less vital importance than that of Hunger. A great wall separates the masses from those imperative truths that must be known and flung wide if civilization is to be saved. As currently constituted, Church, Press, Education seem to-day organized to exploit the ignorance and the prejudices of the masses, rather than to light their way to self-salvation.

Such was the situation in 1914, when I returned to America, determined, since the exclusively masculine point of view had

dominated too long, that the other half of the truth should be made known. The Birth Control movement was launched because it was in this form that the whole relation of woman and child—eternal emblem of the future of society—could be more effectively dramatized. The amazing growth of this movement dates from the moment when in my home a small group organized the first Birth Control League. Since then we have been criticized for our choice of the term “Birth Control” to express the idea of modern scientific contraception. I have yet to hear any criticism of this term that is not based upon some false and hypocritical sense of modesty, or that does not arise out of a semi-prurient misunderstanding of its aim. On the other hand: nothing better expresses the idea of purposive, responsible, and self-directed guidance of the reproductive powers.

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Those critics who condemn Birth Control as a negative, destructive idea, concerned only with self-gratification, might profitably open the nearest dictionary for a definition of “control.” There they would discover that the verb “control” means to exercise a directing, guiding, or restraining influence;—to direct, to regulate, to counteract. Control is guidance, direction, foresight. It implies intelligence, forethought and responsibility. They will find in the Standard Dictionary a quotation from Lecky to the effect that, “The greatest of all evils in politics is power without control.” In what phase of life is not “power without control” an evil? Birth Control, therefore, means not merely the limitation of births, but the application of intelligent guidance over the reproductive power. It means the substitution of reason and intelligence for the blind play of instinct.

The term “Birth Control” had the immense practical advantage of compressing into two short words the answer to the inarticulate demands of millions of men and women in all countries. At the time this slogan was formulated, I had not yet come to the complete realization of the great truth that had been thus crystallized. It was the response to the overwhelming, heart-breaking appeals that came by every mail for aid and advice, which revealed a great truth that lay dormant, a truth that seemed to spring into full vitality almost over night—that could never again be crushed to earth!

Nor could I then have realized the number and the power of the enemies who were to be aroused into activity by this idea. So completely was I dominated by this conviction of the efficacy of “control,” that I could not until later realize the extent of the sacrifices that were to be exacted of me and of those who supported my campaign. The very idea of Birth Control resurrected the spirit of the witch-hunters of Salem. Could they have usurped the power, they would have burned us at the stake. Lacking that power, they used the weapon of suppression, and invoked medieval statutes to send us to jail. These tactics had an effect the very opposite to that intended.

They demonstrated the vitality of the idea of Birth Control, and acted as counter-irritant on the actively intelligent sections of the American community. Nor was the interest aroused confined merely to America. The neo-Malthusian movement in Great Britain with its history of undaunted bravery, came to our support; and I had the comfort of knowing that the finest minds of England did not hesitate a moment in the expression of their sympathy and support.

In America, on the other hand, I found from the beginning until very recently that the so-called intellectuals exhibited a curious and

almost inexplicable reticence in supporting Birth Control. They even hesitated to voice any public protest against the campaign to crush us which was inaugurated and sustained by the most reactionary and sinister forces in American life. It was not inertia or any lack of interest on the part of the masses that stood in our way. It was the

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indifference of the intellectual leaders.

Writers, teachers, ministers, editors, who form a class dictating, if not creating, public opinion, are, in this country, singularly inhibited or unconscious of their true function in the community. One of their first duties, it is certain, should be to champion the constitutional right of free speech and free press, to welcome any idea that tends to awaken the critical attention of the great American public. But those who reveal themselves as fully cognizant of this public duty are in the minority, and must possess more than average courage to survive the enmity such an attitude provokes.

One of the chief aims of the present volume is to stimulate American intellectuals to abandon the mental habits which prevent them from seeing human nature as a whole, instead of as something that can be pigeonholed into various compartments or classes. Birth Control affords an approach to the study of humanity because it cuts through the limitations of current methods. It is economic, biological, psychological and spiritual in its aspects. It awakens the vision of mankind moving and changing, of humanity growing and developing, coming to fruition, of a race creative, flowering into beautiful expression through talent and genius.

As a social programme, Birth Control is not merely concerned with population questions. In this respect, it is a distinct step in advance of earlier Malthusian doctrines, which concerned themselves chiefly with economics and population. Birth Control concerns itself with the spirit no less than the body. It looks for the liberation of the spirit of woman and through woman of the child. To-day motherhood is wasted, penalized, tortured. Children brought into the world by unwilling mother suffer an initial handicap that cannot be measured by cold statistics. Their lives are blighted from the start. To substantiate this fact, I have chosen to present the conclusions of reports on Child Labor and records of defect and delinquency published by organizations with no bias in favour of Birth Control. The evidence is before us. It crowds in upon us from all sides. But prior to this new approach, no attempt had been made to correlate the effects of the blind and irresponsible play of the sexual instinct with its deep-rooted causes.

The duty of the educator and the intellectual creator of public opinion is, in this connection, of the greatest importance. For centuries official moralists, priests, clergymen and teachers, statesmen and politicians have preached the doctrine of glorious and divine fertility. To-day, we are confronted with the world-wide spectacle of the realization of this doctrine. It is not without significance that the moron and the imbecile set the pace in living up to this teaching, and that the intellectuals, the educators, the archbishops, bishops, priests, who are most insistent on it, are the staunchest adherents in their own lives of celibacy and non-fertility.

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It is time to point out to the champions of unceasing and indiscriminate fertility the results of their teaching.

One of the greatest difficulties in giving to the public a book of this type is the impossibility of keeping pace with the events and changes of a movement that is now, throughout the world, striking root and growing. The changed attitude of the American Press indicates that enlightened public opinion no longer tolerates a policy of silence upon a question of the most vital importance. Almost simultaneously in England and America, two incidents have broken through the prejudice and the guarded silence of centuries. At the church Congress in Birmingham, October 12, 1921, Lord Dawson, the king's physician, in criticizing the report of the Lambeth Conference concerning Birth Control, delivered an address defending this practice. Of such bravery and eloquence that it could not be ignored, this address electrified the entire British public. It aroused a storm of abuse, and yet succeeded, as no propaganda could, in mobilizing the forces of progress and intelligence in the support of the cause.

Just one month later, the First American Birth Control Conference culminated in a significant and dramatic incident. At the close of the conference a mass meeting was scheduled in the Town Hall, New York City, to discuss the morality of Birth Control. Mr. Harold Cox, editor of the Edinburgh Review, who had come to New York to attend the conference, was to lead the discussion. It seemed only natural for us to call together scientists, educators, members of the medical profession, and theologians of all denominations, to ask their opinion upon this uncertain and important phase of the controversy. Letters were sent to eminent men and women in different parts of the world.

In this letter we asked the following questions:—

1. Is over-population a menace to the peace of the world?
2. Would the legal dissemination of scientific Birth Control information, through the medium of clinics by the medical profession, be the most logical method of checking the problem of over-population?
3. Would knowledge of Birth Control change the moral attitude of men and women toward the marriage bond, or lower the moral standards of the youth of the country?
4. Do you believe that knowledge which enables parents to limit their families will make for human happiness, and raise the moral, social and intellectual standards of population?

We sent this questionnaire not only to those who we thought might agree with us, but we sent it also to our known opponents.

When I arrived at the Town Hall the entrance was guarded by policemen.

They told me there would be no meeting. Before my arrival executives had been greeted by Monsignor Dineen, secretary of

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Archbishop Hayes, of the Roman Catholic archdiocese, who informed them that the meeting would be prohibited on the ground that it was contrary to public morals. The police had closed the doors. When they opened them to permit the exit of the large audience which had gathered, Mr. Cox and I entered. I attempted to exercise my constitutional right of free speech, but was prohibited and arrested. Miss Mary Winsor, who protested against this unwarranted arrest, was likewise dragged off to the police station. The case was dismissed the following morning. The ecclesiastic instigators of the affair were conspicuous by their absence from the police court. But the incident was enough to expose the opponents of Birth Control and the extreme methods they used to combat our progress. The case was too

flagrant, too gross an affront, to pass unnoticed by the newspapers.

The progress of our movement was indicated in the changed attitude of the American Press, which had perceived the danger to the public of the unlawful tactics used by the enemies of Birth Control in preventing open discussion of a vital question.

No social idea has inspired its advocates with more bravery, tenacity, and courage than Birth Control. From the early days of Francis Place and Richard Carlile, to those of the Drysdales and Edward Trulove, of Bradlaugh and Mrs. Annie Besant, its advocates have faced imprisonment and ostracism. In the whole history of the English movement, there has been no more courageous figure than that of the venerable Alice Drysdale Vickery, the undaunted torch-bearer who has bridged the silence of forty-four years—since the Bradlaugh-Besant trial. She stands head and shoulders above the professional feminists. Serenely has she withstood jeers and jests. To-day, she continues to point out to the younger generation which is devoted to newer palliatives the fundamental relation between Sex and Hunger.

The First American Birth Control Conference, held at the same time as the Washington Conference for the Limitation of Armaments, marks a turning-point in our approach to social problems. The Conference made evident the fact that in every field of scientific and social endeavour the most penetrating thinkers are now turning to the consideration of our problem as a fundamental necessity to American civilization. They are coming to see that a QUALITATIVE factor as opposed to a QUANTITATIVE one is of primary importance in dealing with the great masses of humanity.

Certain fundamental convictions should be made clear here. The programme for Birth Control is not a charity. It is not aiming to interfere in the private lives of poor people, to tell them how many children they should have, nor to sit in judgment upon their fitness to become parents. It aims, rather, to awaken responsibility, to answer the demand for a scientific means by which and through which each human life may be self-directed and self-controlled. The exponent of Birth Control, in short, is convinced that social regeneration, no less than individual regeneration, must come from

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within. Every potential parent, and especially every potential mother, must be brought to an acute realization of the primary and individual responsibility of bringing children into this world. Not until the parents of this world are given control over their reproductive faculties will it be possible to improve the quality of the generations of the future, or even to maintain civilization at its present level. Only when given intelligent mastery of the procreative powers can the great mass of humanity be aroused to a realization of responsibility of parenthood. We have come to the conclusion, based on widespread investigation and experience, that education for parenthood must be based upon the needs and demands of the people themselves. An idealistic code of sexual ethics, imposed from above, a set of rules devised by high-minded theorists who fail to take into account the living conditions and desires of the masses, can never be of the slightest value in effecting change in the customs of the people. Systems so imposed in the past have revealed their woeful inability to prevent the sexual and racial chaos into which the world has drifted.

The universal demand for practical education in Birth Control is one of the most hopeful signs that the masses themselves to-day possess

the divine spark of regeneration. It remains for the courageous and the enlightened to answer this demand, to kindle the spark, to direct a thorough education in sex hygiene based upon this intense interest. Birth Control is thus the entering wedge for the educator. In answering the needs of these thousands upon thousands of submerged mothers, it is possible to use their interest as the foundation for education in prophylaxis, hygiene and infant welfare. The potential mother can then be shown that maternity need not be slavery but may be the most effective avenue to self-development and self-realization. Upon this basis only may we improve the quality of the race. The lack of balance between the birth-rate of the "unfit" and the "fit," admittedly the greatest present menace to the civilization, can never be rectified by the inauguration of a cradle competition between these two classes. The example of the inferior classes, the fertility of the feeble-minded, the mentally defective, the poverty-stricken, should not be held up for emulation to the mentally and physically fit, and therefore less fertile, parents of the educated and well-to-do classes. On the contrary, the most urgent problem to-day is how to limit and discourage the over-fertility of the mentally and physically defective. Possibly drastic and Spartan methods may be forced upon American society if it continues complacently to encourage the chance and chaotic breeding that has resulted from our stupid, cruel sentimentalism.

To effect the salvation of the generations of the future—nay, of the generations of to-day—our greatest need, first of all, is the ability to face the situation without flinching; to cooperate in the formation

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of a code of sexual ethics based upon a thorough biological and psychological understanding of human nature; and then to answer the questions and the needs of the people with all the intelligence and honesty at our command. If we can summon the bravery to do this, we shall best be serving the pivotal interests of civilization.

To conclude this introduction: my initiation, as I have confessed, was primarily an emotional one. My interest in Birth Control was awakened by experience. Research and investigation have followed. Our effort has been to raise our program from the plane of the emotional to the plane of the scientific. Any social progress, it is my belief, must purge itself of sentimentalism and pass through the crucible of science. We are willing to submit Birth Control to this test. It is part of the purpose of this book to appeal to the scientist for aid, to arouse that interest which will result in widespread research and investigation. I believe that my personal experience with this idea must be that of the race at large. We must temper our emotion and enthusiasm with the impersonal determination of science. We must unite in the task of creating an instrument of steel, strong but supple, if we are to triumph finally in the war for human emancipation.

CHAPTER II: Conscripted Motherhood

"Their poor, old ravaged and stiffened faces, their poor, old bodies dried up with ceaseless toil, their patient souls made me weep. They are our conscripts. They are the venerable ones whom we should reverence. All the mystery of womanhood seems incarnated in their ugly being—the Mothers! the Mothers! Ye are all one!"

From the Letters of William James

Motherhood, which is not only the oldest but the most important profession in the world, has received few of the benefits of civilization. It is a curious fact that a civilization devoted to mother-worship, that publicly professes a worship of mother and child, should close its eyes to the appalling waste of human life and human energy resulting from those dire consequences of leaving the whole problem of child-bearing to chance and blind instinct. It would be untrue to say that among the civilized nations of the world to-day, the profession of motherhood remains in a barbarous state. The bitter truth is that motherhood, among the larger part of our population, does not rise to the level of the barbarous or the primitive.

Conditions of life among the primitive tribes were rude enough and severe enough to prevent the unhealthy growth of sentimentality, and
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to discourage the irresponsible production of defective children.

Moreover, there is ample evidence to indicate that even among the most primitive peoples the function of maternity was recognized as of primary and central importance to the community.

If we define civilization as increased and increasing responsibility based on vision and foresight, it becomes painfully evident that the profession of motherhood as practised to-day is in no sense civilized. Educated people derive their ideas of maternity for the most part, either from the experience of their own set, or from visits to impressive hospitals where women of the upper classes receive the advantages of modern science and modern nursing. From these charming pictures they derive their complacent views of the beauty of motherhood and their confidence for the future of the race. The other side of the picture is revealed only to the trained investigator, to the patient and impartial observer who visits not merely one or two "homes of the poor," but makes detailed studies of town after town, obtains the history of each mother, and finally correlates and analyzes this evidence. Upon such a basis are we able to draw conclusions concerning this strange business of bringing children into the world.

Every year I receive thousands of letters from women in all parts of America, desperate appeals to aid them to extricate themselves from the trap of compulsory maternity. Lest I be accused of bias and exaggeration in drawing my conclusions from these painful human documents, I prefer to present a number of typical cases recorded in the reports of the United States Government, and in the evidence of trained and impartial investigators of social agencies more generally opposed to the doctrine of Birth Control than biased in favor of it.

A perusal of the reports on infant mortality in widely varying industrial centers of the United States, published during the past decade by the Children's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor, forces us to a realization of the immediate need of detailed statistics concerning the practice and results of uncontrolled breeding. Some such effort as this has been made by the Galton Laboratory of National Eugenics in Great Britain. The Children's Bureau reports only incidentally present this impressive evidence. They fail to coordinate it. While there is always the danger of drawing giant conclusions from pigmy premises, here is overwhelming evidence concerning irresponsible parenthood that is ignored by governmental and social agencies.

I have chosen a small number of typical cases from these reports. Though drawn from widely varying sources, they all emphasize the

greatest crime of modern civilization—that of permitting motherhood to be left to blind chance, and to be mainly a function of the most abysmally ignorant and irresponsible classes of the community.

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Here is a fairly typical case from Johnstown, Pennsylvania. A woman of thirty- eight years had undergone thirteen pregnancies in seventeen years. Of eleven live births and two premature stillbirths, only two children were alive at the time of the government agent's visit. The second to eighth, the eleventh and the thirteenth had died of bowel trouble, at ages ranging from three weeks to four months. The only cause of these deaths the mother could give was that "food did not agree with them." She confessed quite frankly that she believed in feeding babies, and gave them everything anybody told her to give them. She began to give them at the age of one month, bread, potatoes, egg, crackers, etc. For the last baby that died, this mother had bought a goat and gave its milk to the baby; the goat got sick, but the mother continued to give her baby its milk until the goat went dry. Moreover, she directed the feeding of her daughter's baby until it died at the age of three months. "On account of the many children she had had, the neighbors consider her an authority on baby care." Lest this case be considered too tragically ridiculous to be accepted as typical, the reader may verify it with an almost interminable list of similar cases.[1] Parental irresponsibility is significantly illustrated in another case:

A mother who had four live births and two stillbirths in twelve years lost all of her babies during their first year. She was so anxious that at least one child should live that she consulted a physician concerning the care of the last one. "Upon his advice," to quote the government report, "she gave up her twenty boarders immediately after the child's birth, and devoted all her time to it. Thinks she did not stop her hard work soon enough; says she has always worked too hard, keeping boarders in this country, and cutting wood and carrying it and water on her back in the old country. Also says the carrying of water and cases of beer in this country is a great strain on her." But the illuminating point in this case is that the father was furious because all the babies died. To show his disrespect for the wife who could only give birth to babies that died, he wore a red necktie to the funeral of the last. Yet this woman, the government agent reports, would follow and profit by any instruction that might be given her. It is true that the cases reported from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, do not represent completely "Americanized" families. This lack does not prevent them, however, by their unceasing fertility from producing the Americans of to-morrow. Of the more immediate conditions surrounding child-birth, we are presented with this evidence, given by one woman concerning the birth of her last child:

On five o'clock on Wednesday evening she went to her sister's house to return a washboard, after finishing a day's washing. The baby was born while she was there. Her sister was too young to aid her in any way. She was not accustomed to a midwife, she confessed. She cut the cord herself, washed the new-born baby at her sister's house, walked

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home, cooked supper for her boarders, and went to bed by eight o'clock. The next day she got up and ironed. This tired her out, she said, so she stayed in bed for two whole days. She milked cows the day after the birth of the baby and sold the milk as well. Later in the week, when she became tired, she hired someone to do that portion of

her work. This woman, we are further informed, kept cows, chickens, and lodgers, and earned additional money by doing laundry and charwork. At times her husband deserted her. His earnings amounted to \$1.70 a day, while a fifteen-year-old son earned \$1.10 in a coal mine.

One searches in vain for some picture of sacred motherhood, as depicted in popular plays and motion pictures, something more normal and encouraging. Then one comes to the bitter realization that these, in very truth, are the "normal" cases, not the exceptions. The exceptions are apt to indicate, instead, the close relationship of this irresponsible and chance parenthood to the great social problems of feeble-mindedness, crime and syphilis.

Nor is this type of motherhood confined to newly arrived immigrant mothers, as a government report from Akron, Ohio, sufficiently indicates. In this city, the government agents discovered that more than five hundred mothers were ignorant of the accepted principles of infant feeding, or, if familiar with them, did not practise them.

"This ignorance or indifference was not confined to foreign-born mothers....A native mother reported that she gave her two-weeks-old baby ice cream, and that before his sixth month, he was sitting at the table 'eating everything.'" This was in a town in which there were comparatively few cases of extreme poverty.

The degradation of motherhood, the damnation of the next generation before it is born, is exposed in all its catastrophic misery, in the reports of the National Consumers' League. In her report of living conditions among night-working mothers in thirty-nine textile mills in Rhode Island, based on exhaustive studies, Mrs. Florence Kelley describes the "normal" life of these women:

"When the worker, cruelly tired from ten hours' work, comes home in the early morning, she usually scrambles together breakfast for the family. Eating little or nothing herself, and that hastily, she tumbles into bed—not the immaculate bed in an airy bed-room with dark shades, but one still warm from its night occupants, in a stuffy little bed-room, darkened imperfectly if at all. After sleeping exhaustedly for an hour perhaps she bestirs herself to get the children off to school, or care for insistent little ones, too young to appreciate that mother is tired out and must sleep. Perhaps later in the forenoon, she again drops into a fitful sleep, or she may have to wait until after dinner. There is the midday meal to get, and, if her husband cannot come home, his dinner-pail to pack with a hot lunch to be sent or carried to him. If he is not at home, the lunch is

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rather a makeshift. The midday meal is scarcely over before supper must be thought of. This has to be eaten hurriedly before the family are ready, for the mother must be in the mill at work, by 6, 6:30 or 7 P.M....Many women in their inadequate English, summed up their daily routine by, "Oh, me all time tired. TOO MUCH WORK, TOO MUCH BABY, TOO LITTLE SLEEP!"

"Only sixteen of the 166 married women were without children; thirty-two had three or more; twenty had children on year old or under. There were 160 children under school-age, below six years, and 246 of school age."

"A woman in ordinary circumstances," adds this impartial investigator, "with a husband and three children, if she does her own work, feels that her hands are full. How these mill-workers, many of them frail-looking, and many with confessedly poor health, can ever do

two jobs is a mystery, when they are seen in their homes dragging about, pale, hollow-eyed and listless, often needlessly sharp and impatient with the children. These children are not only not mothered, never cherished, they are nagged and buffeted. The mothers are not superwomen, and like all human beings, they have a certain amount of strength and when that breaks, their nerves suffer.”

We are presented with a vivid picture of one of these slave-mothers: a woman of thirty-eight who looks at least fifty with her worn, furrowed face. Asked why she had been working at night for the past two years, she pointed to a six-months old baby she was carrying, to the five small children swarming about her, and answered laconically, “Too much children!” She volunteered the information that there had been two more who had died. When asked why they had died, the poor mother shrugged her shoulders listlessly, and replied, “Don’t know.” In addition to bearing and rearing these children, her work would sap the vitality of any ordinary person. “She got home soon after four in the morning, cooked breakfast for the family and ate hastily herself. At 4.30 she was in bed, staying there until eight. But part of that time was disturbed for the children were noisy and the apartment was a tiny, dingy place in a basement. At eight she started the three oldest boys to school, and cleaned up the debris of breakfast and of supper the night before. At twelve she carried a hot lunch to her husband and had dinner ready for the three school children. In the afternoon, there were again dishes and cooking, and caring for three babies aged five, three years, and six months. At five, supper was ready for the family. The mother ate by herself and was off to work at 5:45.”

Another of the night-working mothers was a frail looking Frenchwoman of twenty-seven years, with a husband and five children ranging from eight years to fourteen months. Three other children had died. When visited, she was doing a huge washing. She was forced into night work to meet the expenses of the family. She estimated that she succeeded

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in getting five hours’ sleep during the day. “I take my baby to bed with me, but he cries, and my little four-year-old boy cries, too, and comes in to make me get up, so you can’t call that a very good sleep.”

The problem among unmarried women or those without family is not the same, this investigator points out. “They sleep longer by day than they normally would by night.” We are also informed that pregnant women work at night in the mills, sometimes up to the very hour of delivery. “It’s queer,” exclaimed a woman supervisor of one of the Rhode Island mills, “but some women, both on the day and the night shift, will stick to their work right up to the last minute, and will use every means to deceive you about their condition. I go around and talk to them, but make little impression. We have had several narrow escapes....A Polish mother with five children had worked in a mill by day or by night, ever since her marriage, stopping only to have her babies. One little girl had died several years ago, and the youngest child, says Mrs. Kelley, did not look promising. It had none of the charm of babyhood; its body and clothing were filthy; and its lower lip and chin covered with repulsive black sores.

It should be remembered that the Consumers’ League, which publishes these reports on women in industry, is not advocating Birth Control education, but is aiming “to awaken responsibility for conditions under which goods are produced, and through investigation, education

and legislation, to mobilize public opinion in behalf of enlightened standards for workers and honest products for all." Nevertheless, in Miss Agnes de Lima's report of conditions in Passaic, New Jersey, we find the same tale of penalized, prostrate motherhood, bearing the crushing burden of economic injustice and cruelty; the same blind but overpowering instincts of love and hunger driving young women into the factories to work, night in and night out, to support their procession of uncared for and undernourished babies. It is the married women with young children who work on the inferno-like shifts. They are driven to it by the low wages of their husbands. They choose night work in order to be with their children in the daytime. They are afraid of the neglect and ill-treatment the children might receive at the hands of paid caretakers. Thus they condemn themselves to eighteen or twenty hours of daily toil. Surely no mother with three, four, five or six children can secure much rest by day.

"Take almost any house"—we read in the report of conditions in New Jersey—"knock at almost any door and you will find a weary, tousled woman, half-dressed, doing her housework, or trying to snatch an hour or two of sleep after her long night of work in the mill. ...The facts are there for any one to see; the hopeless and exhausted woman, her cluttered three or four rooms, the swarm of sickly and neglected children."

These women claimed that night work was unavoidable, as their husbands

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received so little pay. This in spite of all our vaunted "high wages." Only three women were found who went into the drudgery of night work without being obliged to do so. Two had no children, and their husbands' earnings were sufficient for their needs. One of these was saving for a trip to Europe, and chose the night shift because she found it less strenuous than the day. Only four of the hundred women reported upon were unmarried, and ninety-two of the married women had children. Of the four childless married women, one had lost two children, and another was recovering from a recent miscarriage. There were five widows. The average number of children was three in a family. Thirty-nine of the mothers had four or more. Three of them had six children, and six of them had seven children apiece. These women ranged between the ages of twenty-five and forty, and more than half the children were less than seven years of age. Most of them had babies of one, two and three years of age. At the risk of repetition, we quote one of the typical cases reported by Miss De Lima with features practically identical with the individual cases reported from Rhode Island. It is of a mother who comes home from work at 5:30 every morning, falls on the bed from exhaustion, arises again at eight or nine o'clock to see that the older children are sent off to school. A son of five, like the rest of the children, is on a diet of coffee,—milk costs too much. After the children have left for school, the overworked mother again tries to sleep, though the small son bothers her a great deal. Besides, she must clean the house, wash, iron, mend, sew and prepare the midday meal. She tries to snatch a little sleep in the afternoon, but explains: "When you got big family, all time work. Night-time in mill drag so long, so long; day-time in home go so quick." By five, this mother must get the family's supper ready, and dress for the night's work, which begins at seven. The investigator further reports: "The next day was a holiday, and for a diversion, Mrs. N. thought she would go up to the cemetery: 'I got some children up

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