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Preface

[N]o democratic population policy can meet with the approval of the mass of the people so long as each individual follows his own interests, is taught to serve himself and not others and is forced by the character of the environment...to act acquisitively and not co-operatively.... The individual *must not only feel but know* that he is working and living not for himself alone but the whole community.... He must know that his children will be *welcomed by the community as free contributions to the public good....* It is absolutely unthinkable that a co-operative responsible attitude to the population problem can emerge in a competitive acquisitive society.¹

The economic and sociopsychological microfoundations of the billions of the most decentralized conceivable decisions to engage in the acts requisite to the production of new labor power have never been adequately understood. From historical, economic, social, political, demographic, and legal perspectives this book studies the consequences for the labor markets of capitalist societies of their laissez-faire regime of human reproduction.

The focus here is on two interrelated questions. First: if labor is the absolute prerequisite for the surplus that capital must extract to keep expanding, how can individual capitalists and the capitalist mode of production in general rely for an adequate, let alone optimal, supply of workers on so happenstantial a process as the vectored outcome of billions of uncoordinated procreative whims? And second: to what extent does the production of children constitute an autonomous or at least an exacerbating cause of microlevel poverty for those producers? Although these questions may appear to be narrowly economic, examination of the specific manner in which millions of individual procreators uncoordinatedly create a demographic schedule of generative replacement for exhausted labor power that inadvertently responds to or conflicts with systemic labor requirements is one way

of shedding light on the social dynamics of capitalism.²

The central thesis of the book is that the planlessness of the reproduction of the biological basis of the workforce is no more (but also no less) a problem for capitalism than its spontaneous market processes. Capitalism's capacities for responding in a system-stabilizing manner to exogenous changes in the potentially working population are similar in scope and limits to its capacities for adjusting to other exogenous shifts in supply and demand. At least with regard to its normal, cyclically recurrent development—and abstracting from such system-transcending cataclysmic events as global environmental destruction—the system can accommodate such shifts, though often only by introducing other threats to stability. Capital, in other words, has its own built-in, albeit self-contradictory, mechanisms for dealing with what from the vantage point of abstract economic imperatives might appear to be suboptimal biological production of its human material.

That capitalist societies have in fact left the production and reproduction of their central commodity to anarchically operating noncommercial entities is clear. They have certainly not implemented the sarcastic proposal of the Saint-Simonian philosopher, Pierre Leroux, that the rich annually state their demand for poor people, who would then draw lots to see who would be permitted to have children. Indeed, only “[f]ew governments...have been able to...persuade a reluctant population to increase the size of its families.” Even if it were the case, as one strand of feminist theory contends, that the implementation of state population policy “presupposes that women lose control of their ‘means of production,’ the uterus,” the necessary implication today would be that the impossibility of concealing from women that the state was interfering with their autonomy would render such intervention infeasible. Moreover, such patriarchal interference with women's sexual autonomy and reproductive freedom as the state has historically imposed is not incompatible with a demographic *laissez-faire* regime: neither in the nineteenth century nor today, for example, are antiabortion initiatives designed to create an optimally filled labor supply for capitalist firms.³

Why capitalism has extended a noncommodity-producing *laissez-faire* regime to reproduction remains very much an open question. Some on the Left situate the chief impediment to a profit-making alternative in the nature of certain activities such as child care, which has failed to become a branch of capitalist industry because it presents “technical difficulties to the large-scale investment of capital.” Both the lengthy gestation period and the many years of child-rearing constitute a prolonged production period unfavorable to profit maximization. The implausibility of mechanizing and automating the affective and labor-intensive parent-child relationship acts as a further obstacle to capitalization. Moreover, others emphasize, the instrumental relations and personal fungibility inherent in capitalist production are incompatible with the emotional attachments associated with the fostering of human development: “The most effective way to build an industrial economy based on private enterprise was to combine it with motivations that had nothing to do with the logic of the free market.... Human beings are not efficiently designed for a capitalist system of production.”⁴

Axiomatic for the Right is that “a central purpose of human existence—perhaps *the* central purpose—is the reproduction of the species.” Because the family as “a universal institution...serves as the source, protector, and incubator of...children...[a]ll other institutions...exist to support, preserve, or defend that primary social form.” The Right’s specification of the relationship between that institution and U.S. capitalism in particular is extraordinarily frank and revealing:

A capitalist economic system is critically dependent on the successful functioning of the family. The nuclear family...provides the critical matrix for human reproduction while also serving as a highly mobile unit, able to follow the market signals that would raise their incomes while also increasing market efficiency. Moreover, the family contains...the necessary...incentives which make human beings behave in economically useful ways. As industrial capitalism cut persons off from the economic protections provided by kin and village, the family system made each male aware of his responsibilities to protect and provide for his mate as she performed her maternal task. This arrangement generated economically and socially constructive anxiety....⁵

Whatever the causes of continued noncapitalist production of labor power, that the capitalist mode of production, by relinquishing decision-making with respect to family size to individuals, also abandons direct control of the production of its labor force is a functional concession to the ideology of individual liberty. By abstaining from overt intervention at this particular locus of social reproduction, the state cultivates and reinforces the image of the family as at least one reserve of self-determination sheltering its inhabitants from the all too sharply perceived domination and alienation of other institutionalized relationships. Here, the worker can imagine, he or she reigns as supreme as his or her employer at the “hidden abode of production”: just as “No admittance except on business” marks off the employer’s dominion at the point of production, neither the state nor the employer has any business interfering at the point of biological reproduction.⁶

Under the threat of mass disaffection from capitalism engendered by a decade and a half of depression and mass destruction, some post-World War II Western European states strove to deflect worker interest away from a class focus in large part by constructing a comprehensive supraclass social welfare program. By suggesting that the weak working class that had been the object of classical social policy had become an outdated fiction, this strategy instead sought to project the family across all classes and strata as the new object of social policy. The comprehensive equalization of economic burdens among families would amount to a fundamental reconstruction of the system of income distribution—not between social classes or even income strata, but between child-poor and child-rich families.⁷ That non-social-democratically structured capitalist societies such as the United States, which, unintimidated by class conflict, never transcended rhetorical concern with the family, have even disabled themselves from articulating in terms of public policy the relationship between optimal family size for individual pro-

creators and optimal population size for society as a whole (let alone for capital) is the price that they pay for a peculiar anarcho-liberal form of legitimation.

Not only has capital refrained from penetrating family production of new labor power, but employers' structured indifference to that process entails an insistence on a labor-market and wage-formation system that disregards the fact that wages must finance the reproduction of labor power. Absent some form of collective corrective, these individual capitalist entities' studied neglect of the reality of the differential needs and demographic contributions of families of varying sizes might trigger societally indigestible disruption. The welfare state has therefore been interpreted as the use of state power to modify indirectly the reproduction of labor power by regulating the amount of money families have available for consumption and providing food, housing, education, and health services. Almost all state social policies, on this view, are designed to affect families' capacity to produce and raise children.⁸

Such indirect means of reproductive regulation, especially in a country with as underdeveloped a welfare state as the United States, may enable families to act less desperately and with greater microrationality without affording any impetus to procreational macrorationality. Relying on the employment- and income-related vicissitudes of the business cycle to shape those reproductive decisions may be a suboptimal method of regulation for some nonexistent pure capitalism, but it is of a piece with that system's overall irrational spontaneity. The consequences are manifest: macrosocietally unplanned reproduction creates disproportionalities in the form of maldistributed familial income insufficient to sustain an adequate standard of living for some parents and children. At the same time, the inevitable general or partial overproduction of labor into which reproduction eventuates, with a two-decade lag, must be financed by resources that could otherwise have supported further capital accumulation.

As capitalist societies have historically oscillated between perceived crises of overpopulation and underpopulation, the ruling regime of procreational *laissez faire* has impeded the formation of a process of solidarization even among fellow citizens of the same nation-state let alone among all human beings. Without any (democratically achieved or authoritarily imposed) national consensus as to the desirable direction of demographic development or of the size of the next generation, each is reduced to acquiescing after the fact in everyone else's reproductive output. So long as there is a widely perceived fear of underpopulation, few would begrudge even the poor their large families; similarly, when overpopulation is seen as a threat to living standards or the environment, childlessness is hardly looked at askance. Conversely, however, when the ratio between the working population, which finances pay-as-you-go old-age pensions, and pensioners is deteriorating, payors who have also contributed future payors in the form of progeny may well view intentional nonreproducers as antisocial free riders; and, similarly, in the face of overpopulation, individual self-regarding decisions (or, even worse, reckless nondecisions) to procreate at levels that must exacerbate the population crisis may alienate conscientious nonreproducers or moderate reproducers, who are taxed to

support such macrodemographically superfluous minor dependents. The question, however, is whether demographic crises as would generate such economic crises have in fact ever beset advanced capitalist societies or whether such cogenerational conflicts have ideological origins.

The contradiction between rationality and individual autonomy has characterized both capitalist and real-existing socialist societies. For the latter and any formations that succeed them, the dilemma consists in the improbability that any society that has failed to create members able to make reproductive decisions that are both personally and societally appropriate would bring forth state managers who could be trusted to make those decisions in *locus parentis*. A society that can educate such managers, however, would need neither them nor such surrogate decision-making.

In order to avoid misunderstandings and disappointments, it is equally important at the outset to stress what this book is not about. First, it does not concern itself at all with Third World population questions. One gauge of the enormous qualitative gap between population problems in advanced capitalist societies and impoverished ex-colonial countries is the fact that even such a devoted communitarian as Titmuss, whose trenchant socialist demographic critique furnished the epigraph to this preface, when advising a Third World government, struck a quasi-Malthusian tone. In light of the “far too menacing” population problem in Mauritius, where large families were “the biggest single cause of poverty,” he recommended capping the family allowance benefit at three dependent children lest the program be criticized for “tacitly approv[ing] the procreation of large families.”⁹

Second, although women necessarily bear the most immediate and crushing biological and physical burdens of procreation (and unnecessarily and nonbiologically that of child care), the book’s self-consciously economist framework programmatically alludes, but precludes doing complete justice, to this gender difference of enormous historical and sociopsychological import.

And finally, the book touches only secondarily and comparatively on issues of race and single-mother families—as heroically astringent as this abstraction may be at a time when the latter alone account for more than one-third of those officially deemed poor in the United States.¹⁰ By focusing, wherever data are available, on two-parent and two-earner—and, for the United States, white—families, which have the greatest chance of avoiding poverty, the book seeks to confront the thesis of child-related poverty with the hardest possible case.

Part I situates the discussion of the micro- and macroeconomic consequences of family size within the contemporary demographic debate. Chapter 1 introduces the income constraints associated with the working-class family life cycle and the prevailing economic theory of procreational motivation. Chapter 2 examines the contradictions inherent in the effort by the advanced capitalist state to articulate and implement a population policy. Part II analyzes the history of the theory and practice of invisible-hand Malthusianism. Chapter 3 discusses the

origins and early development of invisible-hand demographic discourse among the classical English political economists, Smith, Malthus, Ricardo, and the Mills. This account is then embedded in contemporaneous public policy embodied in the British poor laws in chapter 4. Part III focuses on the working-class or socialist response to Malthusianism. The working-class neo-Malthusian movements in nineteenth-century Europe are presented in chapter 5. Marx's complex theory of surplus population is the subject of chapter 6. The most interesting intraproletarian debate on the issue of the micro- and macroeconomic consequences of large families, the so-called birth-strike controversy in Germany shortly before World War I, occupies chapter 7. Part IV brings the subject into the present and future. Chapter 8 offers a broad selection of empirical data on the relationship between poverty and family size according to number of children. Chapter 9 focuses on the most venerable and important state policy designed to combat poverty associated with the cost of supporting large families—family or children's allowances. Finally, chapter 10 reviews and evaluates current family policy debates with a view to the contribution they make toward enhancing overall social solidarity.

Gail Hollander, John Houghton, Andy Morriss, Larry Norton, Ingrid Nygaard, Geoffrey Palmer, Julius Sensat, and Larry Zacharias helped make procreation fathomable.

NOTES

1. Richard Titmuss & Kathleen Titmuss, *Parents Revolt* 120 (1985 [1942]).
2. Wally Seccombe, *A Millennium of Family Change: Feudalism to Capitalism in Northwestern Europe* 16 (1992).
3. Pierre Leroux, "De la Recherche des biens matériels, ou de l'individualisme et du socialisme: l'économie politique et l'évangile," *Revue sociale* 1 (3):66-79 at 69 (Feb. 1846); W. Frazer, *A History of English Public Health 1834-1939*, at 251 (1950) (quote); Anneliese Bergmann, "Geburtenrückgang—Gebärstreik: Zur Gebärstreikdebatte 1913 in Berlin," *Archiv für die Geschichte des Widerstandes und der Arbeit* 4:7-55 at 9 (1981) (quote).
4. Bruce Curtis, "Capital, the State and the Origins of the Working-Class Household," in *Hidden in the Household: Women's Domestic Labour Under Capitalism* 101-34 at 112 (Bonnie Fox ed., 1980) (quote); Diemut Bubeck, *Care, Gender, and Justice* 27-29 (1995); Emily Blumenfeld & Susan Mann, "Domestic Labour and the Reproduction of Labour Power: Towards an Analysis of Women, the Family and Class," in *Hidden in the Household* 267-307 at 296-97; Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991*, at 16, 414 (1996 [1994]) (quote).
5. Allan Carlson, *Family Questions: Reflections on the American Social Crisis* xvi (1989).
6. Karl Marx, 1 *Das Kapital*, in Karl Marx [&] Friedrich Engels, *Werke* 23:189 (1962 [1867]).

7. Gerhard Mackenroth, "Die Reform der Sozialpolitik durch einen deutschen Sozialplan," in *Schriften des Vereins für Sozialpolitik* (n.s.) 4:39-76 at 39-40, 52, 57-59 (1952).

8. Wally Seccombe, "Domestic Labour and the Working-Class Household," in *Hidden in the Household* 25-99 at 50; *idem*, "The Expanded Reproduction Cycle of Labour Power in Twentieth-Century Capitalism," in *ibid.* 217-66 at 232-33; Ian Gough, *The Political Economy of the Welfare State* 44-46 (1982 [1979]).

9. Richard Titmuss & Brian Abel-Smith, *Social Policies and Population Growth in Mauritius: Report to the Governor of Mauritius* 134-35 (1961). On his communitarianism, see, e.g., Richard Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy* (1971 [1972]).

10. Of 36,880,000 persons estimated below the poverty line in 1992, 12,707,000 or 34.5 percent lived in families with a female householder, no spouse present, and with related children under 18. The inclusion of nonwhites outside of this type of family brings the total share of the poor accounted for by these two groups above one-half. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Poverty in the United States: 1992*, tab. 5 at 10, 14 (Current Population Reports [CPR], P60-185, 1993). To be sure, the fact that "single-parent families are more likely to be poor...itself needs explaining. It is not an inevitable fact of nature." Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* 259 (1992).

