Poor people frequently assuage their own frustrations by seeking vicarious satisfaction through their children. Child-raising seems, deceptively, to offer an area of control...in which adults have power to create human value according to their own, not their employers’ direction.... Only the liberation of children from the burdens of being useful to adults can make child-bearing a free choice emanating from the desire to perpetuate human life, not oneself.1

The production of population and thus ultimately of the supply of labor is not undertaken “according to rational cost calculations.”2 How, then, can capitalism exist when its most essential prerequisite, labor power, is neither planned nor subject to the law of value—“since men are urged by their natural inclinations, and not by the state of the children-market, or by the desire for profit”—but produced by the nonprofit institution of the working-class family as it is influenced financially by the state and culturally by the bourgeoisie?3 To what extent, for example, do household budgetary constraints as governed by the class distribution of assets and income compel individual-level reproduction conformity with the constraints of abstract economic rationality?

This chapter offers a first approach to answering these questions from an empirical and theoretical perspective. The opening section preliminarily4 examines the extent to which the life cycle of the working-class family historically was and continues to be characterized by phases of impoverishment caused by the advent of children and the significantly increased expenditures they require, which are not matched by corresponding increases in income and may even be causally associated with a decline in family income as wives leave the paid labor force to become full-time mothers. The second section presents and engages the currently most fashionable microeconomic-demographic theory of reproductive behavior, the so-called new household economics, by confronting it with some of the social-
psychological compulsions to procreate that make the reduction of childbearing to a species of self-production consumer durable implausible.

THE PROLETARIAN FAMILY LIFE CYCLE AND THE FAMILY WAGE

The relation of parent to child is one of sacrifice. The interests of children and parents are antagonistic.... It may well be believed that, if procreation had not been put under the dominion of a great passion, it would have been caused to cease by the burden it entails.5

For the quarter-century Keynesian boom following World War II, some social policy theorists postulated the construction of a “fordist life cycle,” which, through “a system of wage stabilization at historically high standards of living...eliminated the ‘cycle of poverty’...traditionally associated with the working class life course.” This system of mass production cum mass consumption, linked to an increasingly pervasive social wage that replaced income during periods of incapacitation, sickness, unemployment, and retirement, purportedly made it possible for some adult male industrial workers without college educations to avoid reproductively triggered cyclical impoverishment.6 Yet as the end of the postwar reconstruction witnessed the “relative decline of the fordist life cycle,”7 even among those who would reject the claim that poverty is still the proletarian condition in general, many agree that for those working-class families who make a reproductive contribution or sacrifice, a distinctly cyclical impoverishment arises from the discrepancy between consumption needs and income (“pauperism of consumption”).8

The most intense squeeze on family income or consumption coincides with those phases when parents must support the greatest number of offspring simultaneously, relatively low-paid men’s earnings have already passed their peak, and yet the wife-mother is least in a position to step out of her quasi-ascribed gendered role and to work for wages.9 Even at the height of the relatively unselfconscious consumer mania of the mid-1950s, when the Committee for Research on Consumer Attitudes and Behavior sought to hitch the life cycle approach scientifically to family developmental stages to Fordist consumption patterns,10 surveys confirmed not only that couples (whose heads were under the age of 45) with children had lower median incomes and liquid assets than their childless counterparts, but that more of them expressed dissatisfaction with their incomes and savings; not coincidentally, twice as many childless wives reported employment as did mothers.11

Such microdemographically exacerbated cyclical family impoverishment should not be surprising. After all, even on the most general theoretical level, Marx, who conceptualized the wage as sufficient to cover the costs of production of labor power—that is, the costs of workers’ existence and procreation—assumed that this identity applied only to the class as a whole, not to the individual worker,
“millions of whom do not receive enough to be able to exist and procreate....”

This divergence between individual and class living standards is rooted in the fact that the proletariat does not engage in reproduction and thus reproduce itself as a class but rather by means of millions of individual procreating units. According to this model, then, a significant segment of the working class must, during some phases of the household’s demographic and life cycle, fail to receive wages sufficient to buy the rudiments of the historically and societally prevailing level of subsistence.

Although such fertility-exacerbated class poverty undermines the viability and vitality of the next generation of workers through above-average and medically preventable mortality, it may also increase the supply of labor as wives and children of child-rich families are forced into the labor market to restore the balance between the value of (the father-husband’s) labor power and subsistence that a competitive wage denies such large families. Perversely, the very attempt by individual proletarian families to eliminate the household budgetary deficit may undermine the position of the class as a whole by throwing huge numbers of lower-paid workers into an already overstocked market. The connection between family size and poverty over the family cycle is modified in families operating family farms since the father can more flexibly react to the per capita income squeeze by using his legally privileged access to his children’s labor at an age that the state otherwise outlaws. Insofar as these accretions to the total societal labor supply are, as adults, unable to sustain themselves on the same farm, microeconomic rationality in this generation may reproduce itself as macroeconomic irrationality in the labor market in the next.

Several late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. working-class surveys revealed the extent to which the proletarian husband-father’s inability to earn a family wage on his own forced the wife and children to engage in wage labor to maintain the family’s standard of living. As early as 1875, Carroll Wright’s study of 397 working-class families in Massachusetts revealed that only 36 percent of fathers were able to support their families alone whereas 64 percent were “assisted” by their wives or children. Although 56 percent of skilled workers managed to support their families alone, only 10 percent of the unskilled could do so. Whereas only 12 wives were employed, 325 children (including 177 aged 14 and under) worked. The earnings of these younger children accounted for 12 percent of total family income and 19 percent of income in families in which the husband-father was an unskilled laborer. The earnings of all children represented 24 percent of total family income, rising to 36 percent among the families of the unskilled. These results prompted Wright to conclude that “without children’s assistance...the majority of families would be in poverty or debt.”

When Wright became U.S. Commissioner of Labor, he conducted much larger national and international surveys of working-class family budgets. In his annual report for 1890, Wright published cost-of-living data for 3,260 families of iron, steel, and coal workers in the United States and Europe. Again, astonishingly, only 36 wives were sources of family income. In contrast to the earlier and smaller
state sample, however, in only 20 percent of the U.S. families with children did any children contribute income, ranging from 15 percent among coke workers to 31 percent among bituminous coal miners. Although the annual wages of the highest-paid husbands, bar iron workers, were more than twice as high as those of the lowest-paid, iron ore workers, almost identical proportions of their families with children included at least one who worked—16 percent and 17 percent respectively. These shares suggest that the mere fact that a lower-paid husband-father was the sole wage-earner did not necessarily mean that he earned a family wage; it may have meant that because the local industrial structure offered fewer opportunities for child labor, the per capita income of such families was especially low. Deviation from the male family-wage model was even greater in Europe, where children worked in 42 percent of all families with children.¹⁹

In his report for 1891, Wright published cost-of-living data for textile and glass workers in the United States and Europe, which disclosed an even greater reliance on child labor than the previous year’s survey. Among the lowest-paid U.S. group, cotton factory workers, 16 percent of the wives in the United States and 22 percent of those in Europe were a source of family income. In the United States, children in 56 percent of the families with children contributed to family income compared to 49 percent in Europe. Among U.S. woollen workers, who were somewhat higher paid than cotton workers, the proportions were lower: 9 percent of wives worked and children in 34 percent of families with children contributed income. The corresponding figures in Europe, where woollen workers’ wages were somewhat lower than those in cotton manufactures, were 19 percent and 54 percent respectively. Only the U.S. glass workers, whose wages were, respectively, 95 percent and 56 percent higher than those of cotton and woollen workers (and even 11 percent higher than those of bar iron workers), could be regarded as having approximated model family-wage earners. Only 2 percent of their wives contributed income, and in only 21 percent of the families with children did any of them work.²⁰

Wright’s two international surveys revealed the existence of family life cycles in the sense that they uncovered a monotonically increasing mean total family income and share of total income accounted for by children as the family’s youngest child grew up. A reworking of Wright’s data for the two years shows that mean total family income in the United States rose from $669 when the youngest child was under 5 years of age, to $769 when that child was 5 to 14 years old, and peaked at $834 when the youngest child was 15 or older. The share of family income accounted for by children during these three stages was 10, 23, and 27 percent respectively. The greater intensity of child labor in Europe expressed itself in correspondingly higher shares: 12, 31, and 46 percent of family income respectively.²¹

Wright’s survey of more than 25,000 U.S. families in 1903 again underscored the tenuousness of the male family-wage model. It revealed that children in 23 percent of the families even with U.S.-born heads worked; in those with German- and Irish-born heads the proportion rose to 38 percent and 36 percent
respectively. In addition, in 9 percent of all families the wives also contributed income. Some contemporaries and even historians have charged that a qualitative difference separated the role played by child labor in the strategies used by U.S.-born family heads and their immigrant counterparts to deal with the proletarian poverty cycle. Thus a Juvenile Court judge explained to a group of large Detroit employers in 1912 that “while American-born parents were glad to keep their children in school to sixteen,” immigrants rear large families, and they begin, without exception almost, in poverty and rise through a gradually increasing line of prosperity to a point where the maximum number of children are of the working age...and then as the children marry...go down the poverty side again.... They...force them into work, and confiscate the entire wages...for the family support. They build largely on the commercial value of their children. In fact, however, Wright’s 1903 survey disclosed that although 17 percent of the children of foreign-born heads worked compared with 13 percent of the children of U.S.-born heads, 45 percent of the former were in school in comparison with 43 percent of the latter. Nevertheless, the data also revealed that most prominently among Irish families the fathers’ low wages induced them to engage in a demographic labor-market strategy: high fertility, budgetary constraints, and child labor combined to enable these families to achieve total incomes comparable to those of native-born families despite the fathers’ lower incomes. Wright’s 1875 Massachusetts survey had also brought to light some evidence of the existence of a family cycle of work and income by correlating family size and sources of income. Among childless couples, wives accounted for 28 percent of total family income—a proportion far in excess of their contributions once they became mothers. Thus already the advent of the first child “keeps the mother at home” and her share declined to 3 percent; after the first child it became infinitesimal. Although the usefulness of the data is vitiated by a failure to indicate the age of the parents and whether family size had been completed, they nevertheless reveal that the children’s contribution to total family income rose monotonically in parallel with the number of children: in families with 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 children, the offspring’s contribution to total family income amounted to 3, 23, 35, 42, and 50 percent respectively. Smaller-scale and less detailed studies of working-class budgets and standards of living in New York City at the beginning of the twentieth century confirmed the limited scope of the family-wage pattern. Among the 200 families in Louise More’s 1907 survey, 47 percent of the wives and 37 percent of the children were employed; since 31 percent of the families also derived income from boarders or lodgers, the wives’ and children’s contributions were even greater. These three sources accounted for 9, 12 and 9 percent respectively of total family income. These findings sufficed to refute the “popular impression, outside the
working class,...that the entire income of the workingman's family is from the earnings of the head of the family.” Instead, More found “comparatively few families of wage-earners...entirely dependent on the earnings of the head of the family.” This structure may have prevailed “in families where there are several young children,...but...[a]s the children grow older and require less of her care at home, the mother takes in sewing or goes out washing, secures a janitor’s place, cleans offices, and does whatever she can to increase the weekly income.”

Similarly, only 47 percent of the 318 families investigated by Robert Chapin in 1909 were “able or willing to get along with what the father's wages bring in.” Above-average working-class incomes, in particular, were “obtainable as a rule only by taking lodgers or by putting mother and children to work.”

A survey of 11,000 families in industrial sections of Philadelphia in 1917-18 revealed that only 45 percent of families were supported by husbands alone.

Studies of other late-nineteenth-century U.S. cities corroborate the low labor force participation rates of married women. Among more than 7,000 women living with their husbands in industrial sections of Philadelphia at the end of World War I, only 14 percent were gainfully employed away from or at home. Nationally, the decennial censuses revealed that the proportion of married women gainfully occupied by 1930 was still only 11.7 percent compared to 4.6 percent in 1890. To be sure, this aggregate average concealed the enormous gap between white and black women. In 1920, for example, when only 6.3 percent of native white married women were engaged in gainful occupations, the share for black women was more than 5 times as high—32.5 percent. Likewise, a study conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1918 revealed that only 8.9 percent of white families had income from the wife’s earning compared to 43.7 percent of “colored” families.

Summarizing the available data on wages and standards of living on the eve of World War I, the economist Scott Nearing concluded “that it is financially impossible for an overwhelming majority of male wage-earners...to provide a fair standard of living for a family of three children, and further that a considerable proportion of these wage-earners do not receive a wage large enough to provide even a minimum standard of living....” Because wives and children supplemented these incomes, however, his conclusion did not mean that such a large share of families failed to secure a minimum or fair standard of living. A decade later Paul Douglas still found that: “Families with two or more dependent children...find it difficult to subsist on prevailing wages and a large proportion of them are in actual need, the intensity of which increases as the number of dependent children increases.”

Coming in the midst of all these surveys demonstrating the limited reach of the family wage, its vindication by Samuel Gompers, the president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), sheds more light on the multiple ideologies of the unions of the skilled than about the economic reality of working-class reproduction. Writing in the AFL’s house organ in 1906, Gompers answered “absolutely, ‘No,’” to his own question: “Should the Wife Help to Support the
Relying on "the holiness of motherhood" on the one hand and American exceptionalism on the other, he argued that even with regard to a mere laborer: "In our time, and at least in our country, generally speaking, there is no necessity for the wife contributing to the support of the family by working—that is...by wage labor. In our country...producing wealth in such prodigious proportions, the wife as wage-earner is a disadvantage economically considered, and socially is unnecessary."38

Where the AFL fled from the facts of life to patriarchal fantasy, poverty investigators retained a grip on reality. In view of the long tradition of French state demographic intervention, for example, it is not surprising that social observers in France early on remarked that a customary wage was insufficient to support a family with three young children.39 A mid-nineteenth-century account of the household budgets of cotton workers in Mulhouse by Louis Reybaud, a former French legislator and author of numerous works on industry and the working class, presented one of the earliest narratives of the proletarian life cycle. Whereas the wage level sufficed to establish "equilibrium" for unmarried male workers without much effort, for married workers, the situation was complicated by the number and age of the children and the wife's working. Reybaud identified three distinct periods, each with its own physiognomy, in the life of the married worker. In the first, the most laborious but also the phase in which the worker was strongest, the household was full of young children who required supervision, were costly, and as yet yielded no return. Because pregnancy and lactation diminished the resources that the wife could contribute on her own account, the husband shouldered the financial burden almost alone. In the second period, when the children were between the ages of 8 and 15, the small sums that they contributed transformed them from burdens into resources. During these 12 to 15 years, the couple was at the height of their powers, experiencing easier circumstances and the possibility of saving some money. The third period, marked by the departure of the children and their financial contributions, was much less favorable. With their physical powers and wages in decline, the husband and wife could, if they had lacked the foresight to save during the good days for the bad, look forward only to public assistance or living with their children.40

Forty years later, a British poverty investigator undertaking one of the earliest detailed empirical studies of this cyclical deprivation impressively underscored the pattern sketched by Reybaud. In his turn-of-the-century privately funded large-scale survey of York, England, cocoa capitalist Seebohm Rowntree41 diagrammed the representative worker's undulating movements into and out of poverty:

The life of a labourer is marked by five alternating periods of want and comparative plenty. During early childhood...he will probably be in poverty; this will last until he, or some of his brothers or sisters, begin to earn money and thus augment their father's wage sufficiently to raise the family above the poverty line. Then follows the period during which he is earning money and living under his parents'
roof; for some of this period he will be earning more than is required for lodging, food, and clothes. This is his chance to save money. If he has saved enough to pay for furnishing a cottage, this period of comparative prosperity may continue after marriage until he has two or three children, when poverty will again overtake him. This period of poverty will last perhaps for ten years, *i.e.* until the first child is fourteen years old and begins to earn wages; but if there are more than three children it may last longer. While the children are earning, and before they leave home to marry, the man enjoys another period of prosperity—possibly, however, only to sink back again into poverty when his children have married and left him, and he himself is too old to work, for his income has never permitted his saving enough for him and his wife to live upon for more than a very short time.42

The snapshot of poverty that Rowntree developed for York captured only those workers who happened to be going through one of the poverty phases at the time of the survey. Later, when they passed out of this phase, however, others whom Rowntree had recorded as nonpoor would replace them. Thus the total proportion of laborer families suffering physical privation at some point in their life cycle considerably exceeded those below the poverty line at any given time. In particular, "every labourer who has as many as three children must pass through a time, probably lasting for about ten years, when...he and his family will be underfed."43 In re-surveying York's working class almost four decades later, Rowntree confirmed the continued existence of three periods of economic stress in the course of the working-class life cycle. Specifically, he determined that about one-half of working-class children lived in poverty during the first four years of their lives and a similar proportion during old age; between the ages of 25 and 44, when most children were born to parents, the proportion of workers passing through periods of poverty was almost three-tenths. Rowntree's conclusion, however, that half of the working class spent part of their lives in poverty was fallacious since his snapshot did not permit him to discover whether those who were impoverished later in life were the same people who had been born into poverty or whether they were new recruits.44

During World War I, Rowntree remedied some of the defects of the frozen-in-time undercount by prevailing upon the Registrar-General to extract data from the 1911 census schedules for York on practically completed families—that is, those in which the mother was 40 to 45 years old. Although the data did not touch on income and poverty, Rowntree found that in only 16 percent of families were no dependent children living at home at the date of the census; 46 percent of families had three or more dependent children for 5 years or more and 36 percent for 10 or more years; 14 percent of families supported 5 or more children for at least 5 years.45

When the Registrar-General performed the same data extraction from the 1931 census, the declining birth rate was reflected in a somewhat diminished life cycle burden; nevertheless, 30 percent of all families still had 3 or more children
for 5 or more years and 21 percent for at least 10 years, while 5 percent of families supported 5 or more children 5 or more years. Looked at from a slightly different perspective: in 1911, 72 percent of all children grew up in families having 3 or more dependent children for 5 years or more compared to 59 percent two decades later; the corresponding proportions for families supporting 3 or more children for 10 years or more were 59 percent and 46 percent respectively, and for those with 5 or more children for 5 or more years 38 percent and 15 percent respectively. Whereas in 1911, 21 percent of families supported at least 5 children simultaneously, by 1931 only 9 percent did; similarly, in 1911, 43 percent of children lived in families with at least 5 dependent children compared to 24 percent 20 years later.

Rowntree’s life cycle approach gained adherents among poverty investigators in the United States too. Statisticians for the U.S. Public Health Service, in the course of conducting an epidemiological study of pellagra among 4,000 families in South Carolina cotton-mill villages during World War I, confirmed the inevitability of proletarian poverty during certain phases of the life cycle. Among these near-subsistence-level workers, this period lasted 10 or 15 years—until the children themselves could begin working (at age 14) in the mills. Later, Howard Bigelow popularized the use of the life cycle approach to the study of family consumption patterns. That Bigelow generalized this conceptualization of the proletarian condition was ironic in light of his individualizing and voluntaristic belief that “the family as the consuming unit is the supreme authority which by its purchases controls the course of production.... It is because there are whole groups of families that have not been able to adjust their personal affairs successfully to the changes in their environment that we are faced with many economic and social problems.... The place for most of us to attack them is in our own homes.” Moreover, his cavalier assumption that as late as the 1950s the child-rich family could still “safely postpone its accumulation for old age, because if worst comes to worst it can fall back upon the combined earnings of several children for support” flowed from his conviction that “by improving our own manner of living, each of us...is doing something definitely to make the world a better place....” Nevertheless, Bigelow recognized that the child-rearing phases plunge subsistence-level families into poverty and reduce the living standards of others.

In the 1970s, the economist A.B. Atkinson illustratively updated Rowntree’s method using the example of a representative British worker whose wife gave birth to three children when he was 21, 24, and 29 years old respectively. Assuming that the worker’s earnings placed him in the lowest income decile and that his wife began working part-time only when the youngest child reached 15, Atkinson determined that the family was in poverty until only the youngest child remained a financial charge; thus only from the man’s early 40s until age 60 did the family’s income exceed its needs.

Ironically, such repeated findings of income cyclicity over the family’s lifetime may contrast sharply with children’s perceptions, which are skewed by
Dilemmas of Laissez-Faire Population Policy

their lack of the longer view. Thus in a report on a two-child, two-working-parent family in New York City whose $38,000 income leaves it “on the cusp of hard times and of making it,” The New York Times recently quoted one of the children as foreseeing no improvement for her parents: “[U]nless they hit the Lotto, this is how it’s going to be the rest of their lives. And that’s sad, to think that’s it. This is as good as it’s going to get.” Presumably, however, once the younger, 13-year-old, child ceases to be a drag on her parents’ finances, the husband and wife may well move on to a typical path in which their personal standard of living increases before retirement—unless it was the need to support children that induced the parents to work as hard as they did in the first place and the children’s departure induces them to revert to the not yet atavistic model of the family wage in which the husband can fulfill his preference that his wife “be at home.”50 As noted a century ago, what husbands who are ideologically wed to the family wage “object to is the wage-earning not the work of wives.”51 To the extent that the children fail to detect a causal connection between their own existence and what they perceive as their parents’ financial plight, they may be unable to draw any consequences for their own procreative behavior.

In order to gauge the severity of the troughs of procreators’ life cycles it is necessary to juxtapose it to that of nonreproducers. In the early 1960s Ann Smith Rice in her home economic dissertation undertook the most detailed national economic study of the life cycle of childless families in the United States based on unpublished data from the 1960 census of population and the contemporaneous Survey of Consumer Finances. Unfortunately, because the requisite nationwide data for constructing life histories of married couples had never been collected,52 this study, too, was unable to provide a longitudinal study, and had to settle for merely describing the situation of childless families and parents in various phases of the life cycle at one point in time.53

Rice found that during the first two decades of marriage, the income of the childless was higher than that of parents because a larger proportion of wives—whose educational attainment exceeded not only mothers’ but their own husbands’ years of schooling—worked. During the first ten years of marriage, the modal childless couple’s income lay between $8,000 and $10,000, whereas the greatest concentration of parents’ incomes fell between $5,000 and $6,000. During this phase, the childless couples’ median income was 6 percent higher; during the phase lasting from the 11th to the 23rd year of marriage, the gap rose to 9 percent. Only from the 24th year on did the parents’ median income slightly exceed that of the childless. Whereas family income of the childless peaked during the second decade of marriage and declined during the third decade because a smaller share of wives worked, parents’ income peaked during the third decade when at least one of their children became independent. During the first four years of marriage, 85 percent of childless wives contributed to the family’s income and that contribution averaged 38 percent of the family’s income; the corresponding proportions for mothers were 46 percent and 22 percent respectively. The proportion of childless wives contributing to family income then declined until after 20 years of marriage.
only 35 percent contributed; by that phase, 40 percent of mothers, largely finished raising children, were contributing.\textsuperscript{54}

During all phases, however, the liquid assets of the childless were significantly higher. During the first four years of marriage, 25 percent of parents had no such assets compared to only 11 percent of the childless. The median liquid assets of the childless were five, four, and two times greater than those of the parents during the first, second, and third decade of marriage respectively.\textsuperscript{55} It must be stressed that all the foregoing income and assets comparisons are understatements because the data are aggregate family averages and not per capita averages taking into account the procreators’ larger families. The differential impact of reproductive contributions over the life cycle on the economic status of adults thus continues to impose itself.

More recent data from the Survey of Consumer Finances shed some additional light on procreationally differentiated lifetime wealth. In the 1980s, for example, the mean wealth of families without children (living at home) was twice as large as that of their counterparts with children. Similarly, of the richest 1 percent of households (with net worth of \$1.7 million and \$2.0 million in 1983 and 1989 respectively), 66 percent and 59 percent were married couples without children, whereas married couples with children accounted for 23 percent and 25 percent respectively. Although the relevance of this comparison is diluted by the lack of age-specific data, which could segregate out families whose heads were presumptively too old to have dependent children, it is nevertheless noteworthy that even among rich household heads 45 to 54 years old, one-half had no children living at home.\textsuperscript{56}

The dismal conclusion from Rowntree’s original turn-of-the-century survey—that the higgling of the labor market could not secure the needs of even the average working-class family—prompted Britain’s new liberals to advocate a living family wage that was in part a charge on the “social surplus.”\textsuperscript{57} In the event, not all remedies went that far. One palliative for this type of cyclical deprivation associated with the phases of familial reproduction might entail intra- or interpersonal or intra- or interclass redistributational evening out of income peaks and valleys. Thus it might be possible through a compulsory insurance scheme to ward off this particular type of poverty. Workers in the aggregate could, for example, be forced to save enough during the relatively nonpoor phases of the life cycle to finance their class’s reproduction. Nonproletarian classes could, however, also be compelled to subsidize proletarian procreation by means of general revenues from a progressive tax system. William Beveridge, a central figure in the construction of the British social security system, regarded this particular intervention, state-ordered child allowances, as “the greatest break with old tradition” among the innovations of the welfare state: “In addition to the recognised forms of distribution—wages and salaries, profits, rent, taxation...—there should be a new form: part of the national income should be assigned to those individual citizens who were undertaking the rearing of the citizens of the future, in order to make sure that they had the means for this task.”\textsuperscript{58}
Beveridge's baptism of a new category of national income falls within the social-democratic tradition of ascribing to the state sovereign power to distribute the social product autonomously of the constraints of capitalist production. A state-mediated system that coercively inserts a multidimensional measure into capitalist norms of compensation and income redistribution might constitute a conscious deviation from the bourgeois principle of abstract right and equality. This inchoate system of stipends graduated in accordance with family size was appropriately called the social wage because it took into consideration a criterion other than performance or productivity. Its more ardent advocates claimed for it the achievement of a "social revolution" insofar as it is based not on earning power but "the needs of the worker as citizen, husband and father."\(^59\)

The question thus arises as to whether the identification, reported by the International Labour Office (ILO) in the mid-1920s, of the principle of "to each according to his needs" with the doctrine of the living wage was accurate, especially since the ILO noted that the latter was generally applied to a wage adequate to enable a male adult worker to maintain a family of average size—which varied from country to country.\(^60\) Empirically, this supposition seems to have been premature; after all, even in the early post-World War II period, when, for example, Britain strongly supported family wages, and the typical father of two had to maintain dependent children only for 18 years of a working life that lasted as long as 50 years, enthusiasts conceded that the family and social wage still did not suffice to close the gap in living standards between a bachelor or childless couple and one-earner families passing, of necessity, through that formative stage.\(^61\)

No more authoritative source on what qualifies as falling within the framework of "to each according to his needs" can be drawn on than Karl Marx himself. In sketching a possible transition to a postcapitalist society, Marx insisted that in the first stages, in which all the means of production are collectively owned, individual consumption would remain unequal because distribution would be regulated by the exchange of equivalents and some worker-producers would be contributing more labor than others. Equality before the law would therefore remain a bourgeois principle since legal equality is created by using labor as the equal measure for all workers, some of whom are physically or mentally superior to others:

This equal right is unequal right for unequal labor. It recognizes no class differences because each is only a worker; but it tacitly recognizes workers' individual talent and hence capacity as natural privileges. It is therefore a right of inequality, with respect to its content, like all right. Right can by its nature consist only in the application of the same standard; but the unequal individuals...are measurable only by the same standard insofar as one brings them under the same point of view, captures them only from the one certain side, e.g. in the given case views them only as workers and sees nothing more in them, abstracts from all else.

Further: One worker is married, the other not; one has more
children than the other etc. etc. Given equal amount of work performed and hence equal share in the societal consumption fund, the one thus in fact receives more than the other, the one is richer than the other, etc. In order to avoid all these abuses, right would have to be unequal instead of equal.62

Marx’s conceptualization of the contradictions of a society in transition from capitalism to socialism can be restated as his reflections on the labor market’s failure to value the production of the next generation’s working class and the need to treat procreation as the production of a public good. Rather than being regarded, in Marx’s terms, as a system of unequal right, reproductive subsidies can also be analyzed as a challenge to or a transcending of bourgeois right by virtue of their attack on the latter’s rigid abstraction from human needs. Thus they become a hybrid system because they apply two measures—performance and number of children or, alternatively, material production and human reproduction—resulting in greater equalization of consumption. Alternatively, if the needs-based component is viewed instead as a measure of and compensation for the parents’ contribution to the production of the next generation of workers, the system remains bourgeois but becomes less gendered. Even if, in other words, it were true that family allowances are in conflict with the capitalist principle that in an open market the same price must prevail for different units of the same commodity63—since the wage is an economic and juridical relationship rather than one of charity or controlled by a socialist theory of needs, a reproductively determined wage would lead to the repulsion from the labor market of fathers of large families64—it can plausibly be argued that a worker who produces many replacement proletarians for the capitalist class is selling a different commodity (his own labor power now and his children’s later) than one who produces none—provided that they neither exceed the demand for such future workers nor become social charges.

THE MICROECONOMICS OF ALIENATED PRODUCTION OF THE PRODUCERS

It is true that with every mouth God sends a pair of hands. But it is not true that with every mouth there comes a silver spoon....65

But it is not only money that is lacking, but also time. [T]he only scarce, non-augmentable good...is time. Above all children cost time, not money.66

A recent theoretical debate, based on conventional economic notions about supply, demand, and resource allocation, has led to speculation about capitalism, poverty, and children. Many socioeconomic realities fail to fit these conventional assumptions, and considerable empirical evidence underscores the irrationality of the microeconomic logic. The new microeconomic demography
serves as an apologetics for capitalism and free markets insofar as people—and especially women—take on reproductive labor that has lower exchange value and higher opportunity costs because they continue to recognize a culturally enhanced use value of procreational production that shifts the ordinary pleasure-pain calculus and seems to lack any market proxies.

Market-knows-best economic demography, a procapitalist self-caricature of the shallowest variant of economic determinism, dares to tread where even Marx left gaps. Producers and sellers of commodities are indifferent to the specific, concrete character of their products, which are merely vehicles for the abstract and endless accumulation of capital or for realizing the income they require for their lives outside of production. In principle, the same tendency toward indifference inheres in the worker’s relationship to the only commodity he or she has to sell—labor power. Although some workers rebel some of the time against this logic of capital and protest their alienation at the workplace, the contradiction between abstract and concrete labor cannot be expunged. Nevertheless, as the abstractification of labor reaches ever greater heights, capital, recognizing both a legitimation crisis and an impediment to the extraction of surplus value, seeks new methods of securing workers’ attention at the workplace.67

At a time when management is besieged with alienated wage workers, economic demography insists on transferring the model of abstract economic rationality into the domestic sphere of the production of new labor power otherwise known as child-bearing and child-rearing. Whereas some feminists have criticized Marx for having failed to reflect on the value-theoretical consequences of capital’s treatment of mothers’ reproductive labor as worthless,68 economic demography brutally closes the gap by dragging the creation of children into the sphere of commodity production. Importing the model of profit maximization from boardrooms into bedrooms, the new learning imposes a type of abstract individualism on the analysis of both working-class households’ struggle for subsistence and bourgeois families’ plans for the transmission of wealth that ignores the differential cultural constraints on the domestication of capitalist rationality.69

This one-dimensional microeconomic demography is blind to the fact that one of the unique characteristics of the self-producers/purchasers of children is that they are subject to intense social, economic, psychological, moral, and religious pressure to procreate: “Reproduction even more than sexuality is overlaid with attitudes the individual considers appropriate because he has been learning them ever since early childhood.”70 Although there is no gainsaying the advent in the twentieth century of various mechanisms to sustain high levels of consumption in general and of certain commodities in particular, they lack both the subtlety and the personhood-encompassing scope of the structure of norms constructing parenthood as a vital component of the human condition. No hidden persuader yet has dared to assert that its client’s commodity “is central to individual identity and meaning in life.” Those candid enough to concede that “the desire to reproduce is in part socially constructed,” nevertheless assert that “at the most basic level transmission
of one's genes...is an animal or species urge closely linked to the sex drive.... For many people 'breed'...is a central part of their life plan, and the most satisfying and meaningful experience they have.⁷¹ And even critical Marxists do it, being "prepared to grant that there is a near-universal desire to procreate."⁷²

Although no urge drives humans to perpetuate their species by acts quite so heroic as those of emperor penguins, who incubate eggs for weeks in exposed terrains in -60° Fahrenheit Antarctic winters, philosophical thinkers at least since Plato have attested to the extraordinary ends to which some of those humans will go to become immortal through the flesh who do not belong to the small minority that can achieve immortality through glorious deeds or creations of the spirit.⁷³ Vindicating a niche in the great genetic chain of being by way of "extending our selfhood into the future" has been styled a right every bit as fundamental as that to life itself.⁷⁴ Biological ur-drives this potent—"[w]e are genetically programmed to want and to value" children⁷⁵—should not be in need of penal props; yet the sanctions attached to what are stigmatized as pathological, irresponsible, and pitiable deviations from this prescribed role have been applied with especial force against women.⁷⁶ As long ago as World War I, Leta Hollingsworth spelled out the "Social Devices for Impelling Women to Bear and Rear Children," which she found similar to those used to "get soldiers slain."⁷⁷

By the same token, in certain societies at certain stages of development abstention from procreation has asserted itself sufficiently to make the more interesting question not why (abnormal) people do not have children, but why the majority continues to have children.⁷⁸ Demographic developments in Germany and Italy have in recent years sharply posed this question.⁷⁹ In these two countries, the total fertility rate, which at 2.11 births per woman would just replace the population under current mortality rates and assuming no net immigration,⁸⁰ fell from 2.48 and 2.55 in the first half of the 1960s to 1.28 in 1985 and 1.27 in the early 1990s respectively.⁸¹ In Eastern Germany, where the wrenching conversion of a state-socialist into a capitalist economy prompted a decline in the birth rate by almost two-thirds from 1988 to 1993, the state appears dismayed by its citizens' economically rational "unprecedented birth strike," which is purportedly in part a reaction by women of the former German Democratic Republic to the unfamiliar need to reconcile children, consumption, and career.⁸² In Brandenburg, for example, the government has offered 1,000 marks for the birth of each child in an effort to counteract capitalistically disoriented couples' reluctance "to have children because they are unsure whether they will be able to survive in the newly competitive society."⁸³

Though extreme, such phenomena help explain why, with the end of the baby boom in the early 1960s, scholarly study of voluntarily childless adults began to view them as psychological nondeviants.⁸⁴ Studies have, for example, repeatedly shown that, despite the fact that parents state that they value children highly, "adults with children living at home report less happiness and less satisfaction with their marriages, friends, and leisure activities than adults not living with children." And despite the widespread assumption that parents value children
especially for their companionship in old age, nonparents report the same or greater happiness than parents whose children have left home. On balance, then, the turn-of-the-century observation that a child was not "a good investment for the father of the family," who resembled a breeder whose animals absconded just when they were about to begin to return a yield apparently still remained subjectively plausible for some parents.

Surveys also disclose that a major component of the desirability of parenthood is the instrumental use of children to achieve status and prestige. As contradistinguished from the interest in interacting with children in order to be part of an intriguing and stimulating qualitative growth process, the instrumental aspect emerges "because one does not want to go through life without becoming a parent, or because one would feel aimless or empty without a family, or because having children is a rite of passage in the attainment of adult status...a classic example being...people who loathe children but may have one or more simply to attain the status of being parents." Such pressures may be weakening in the face of heightened dedication to consumption and the work that supports it. Even in the United States, where the fall in fertility below the replacement rate—from 3.71 in the second half of the 1950s to 1.76 in 1985—has not reached European levels, a feminist sociologist was prompted, in the context of the resultant structural antinatalism, to bemoan the fact that feminists' emphasis on the newly gained right and freedom not to reproduce had blinded them to the unintended consequences of demographic decline.

The new economic-demographic approach is further encumbered by the fact that as households ceased to be centers of inanimate commodity production and ultimately became monoproducers, their one commodity is not children per se, who cannot legally be sold, but labor power. Since, however, it is impossible to foresee the demand for labor power (of any kind let alone of a particular kind) two decades in advance of its advent as a finished product in the labor market, whatever rationality attaches to the production-decision-making process must be tenuous at best. That rationality becomes even more attenuated on account of its surrogate character: parents make the decisions as to the creation of fresh labor power, yet ultimately the consequences of their misjudgments are borne individually by the children (and collectively albeit marginally by the class of labor power sellers) if labor market conditions turn out to be unfavorable.

The process of theoretical assimilation that the new economic demography underwent has assumed a mathematically sophisticated form since the 1960s. The starkness of the conversion is more poignant, however, in its unadorned, plain-language variant as set forth during a period when depopulation rather than overpopulation dominated the agenda. In the 1930s, for example, demographers assumed that children were primarily burdens exacerbating their "parents' discomfort and insecurity." Eager to ward off the demise of "Western civilization," Joseph Spengler, soon to become one of the world's leading demographic economists and historians, announced that:
Children are economic commodities even as are books, dogs, or automobiles. The production of commodities...occasions pain to the producers. Men produce automobiles only when the price obtained for the automobiles offsets the pain of producing them. So with children. [M]illions of potential parents feel that the money value of children in an industrial civilization is <i>less</i> than the money cost of creating and rearing them. [A]n adequate price will induce the production of children even as it induces the production of automobiles.\textsuperscript{91}

Despite the fact that those who procreate do so “because they feel that the joy and pleasure” of child-rearing exceeds the money cost, Spengler suggested that the state should pay “whatever wage is necessary to induce...couples to undertake the work” because “it is the state, and not parents, that benefits from the production of children.”\textsuperscript{92} Although some people may refrain from procreating because they lack the material resources to rear children, the assumption that money qua deus ex machina will automatically imbue financially strapped procreators with the experience, insight, tolerance, patience, sensitivity, interest, spontaneity, foresight, skill, maturity, emotional stability, and love that are required to promote the development of a socialized human being does not augur well for the longevity of Western civilization. Expressly commodifying children and reproduction and subjecting them exclusively to market direction would deprive them of the minimum exemption from the disruptive and destructive rigors of capital-logic that makes life under capitalism morally, emotionally, and culturally possible.\textsuperscript{93} That economic demography, when it believes that the time has come to make the invisible hand visible, can find no higher source of legitimation than state necessity, is typical of a social formation that can no longer rely on “une véritable solidarité entre générations.”\textsuperscript{94}

Economic demographers must engage in considerable conceptual contortion to convert children into commodities. Economic theory assumes that consumers reveal preferences when they sacrifice leisure to work in order to produce or obtain the money to buy a commodity. The reproductive corollary that the self-produced supply of children must approximate the procreators’ demand for children is, however, difficult to reconcile with experience:

The problem with treating babies as a normal good is that they are produced by an activity that is not work, but is normally pleasurable, and...periodically...becomes intensely preferable to doing anything else. Consequently...it requires more work...to avoid conception than to produce babies. We cannot then assume that the number of babies produced simply fulfils demand for them.... As soon as we take the sex drive seriously, we must assume...that due to the “leisure preference” in coitus, the number of babies produced will be in excess of the number desired unless the costs of reliable birth control approach zero.\textsuperscript{95}

Moreover, as British eugenicist-socialist Karl Pearson argued, unskilled laborers had little incentive to restrain their fertility since they would have to abstain from
Dilemmas of Laissez-Faire Population Policy

"one of the few pleasures which lie within their reach; a pleasure...which does not, like drinking, appear immediately and directly to reduce the weekly pittance."

In spite of these obvious differences separating the production of labor from that of run-of-the-mill commodities, the Chicago School new household economics inaugurated by Gary Becker has undertaken a reconstruction of childbearing as the self-production of consumer durables. Children have, according to Becker, who has tried to generalize and develop Malthus's economic framework, become the only "major commodity" in which families, at least in the advanced capitalist world, have remained self-sufficient. Even in Becker's view, this self-production is tempered by opportunity costs—especially as a result of wives' increasing earning power. To the extent that richer parents share their wealth with their children, a rise in the effective price of children as income rises diminishes the demand for them. This approach—which became plausible only in the wake of the "construction of the economically worthless child" as children ceased to be "the poor man's capital"—replaced the nineteenth-century factory-worker model according to which "the family," viewing children as "producer durables," "acts like a firm supplying labor services. It has its own labor supply and can create more (with a considerable lag) through childbearing." A family, in deciding to increase its "stock of human capital for later stages in the life cycle," is consciously trading off the income the wife could be earning for the children's later contributions. If the new economic-demographic learning, which at least has the merit of treating the domestic (intrafamily) autoproduction economy as a separate system from that of commodity production, is to be taken seriously even as analogy, a number of salient differences between children and traditional commodities must be attended to.

First, parents do not undertake such production for the same reason (profit) that guides individual firms' capital investment decisions. As "one of the few truly craftlike activities of modern life," parenting has become a "luxury...conducted despite, rather than because of, economic self-interest." Here a pertinent analogy to noncapitalist (simple commodity producing) households suggests itself. Just as the family farm/farm family produces commodities not in order to accumulate capital but merely in order to survive, it produces children who "become living insurance, from which one later expects back all the effort with interest." Yet unlike the peasant landholder, who may not have been able to survive without spousal and child labor, the urban working-class male (and increasingly female as well) in welfare states who neither could nor needed to rely on offspring to finance his retirement, may be economically better off without children. And whereas at one time parents might have begun procreating early and then struggled to keep their children at home as long as possible in order to make use of their labor or wages, such considerations cease to apply in a period when child labor laws virtually insure that children will largely represent a fiscal drain.

Second, the production time or period is very long for children in comparison to that of other commodities. Today, in advanced capitalist
countries—despite the efforts of some factions of capital to deregulate the employment of younger children\textsuperscript{107}—it may take 16 to 30 years before a worker is finally prepared to enter the labor market. Despite these unique characteristics, the population or labor force theory of classical political economy assumed that human reproduction was regulated by the same laws that controlled the rest of production: \( \uparrow \text{demand} \rightarrow \uparrow \text{price (wages)} \rightarrow \uparrow \text{supply} \rightarrow \downarrow \text{price (wage)}. \)\textsuperscript{108} Two centuries ago, when child labor was common, the process was accelerated, although even Thomas Malthus conceded that "the reduced cost of production [of labor] cannot, under sixteen or eighteen years, materially influence the supply of labour in the market."\textsuperscript{109} A contemporary, Thomas De Quincey, underscored the aberrant character of the commodity labor power by delineating the impact of population on wages: if the rate of population change should "sustain the most abrupt change, it would take a score of years before that change could begin to tell upon the labour market."\textsuperscript{110}

Another of Malthus's contemporaries, John McCulloch, author of England's "most successful" general economics treatise in the first half of the nineteenth century,\textsuperscript{111} spelled out the supposed mechanism more explicitly: "When wages rise, a period of eighteen or twenty years must elapse before the influence of the increased stimulus given by the rise to the principle of population can be felt in the labour market." At the other extreme, according to McCulloch, a fall in wages occasioned by a diminution of the wage fund or an increase in population would not quickly bring about a decline in the supply of laborers through increased mortality unless they had "previously been subsisting on the smallest quantity of the cheapest species of food required to support mere animal existence." At the same time,

the force of habit, and the ignorance of the people with respect to the circumstances which determine wages, would prevent any effectual check being given to the formation of matrimonial connexions, and the rate at which fresh labourers had previously been coming into the market, until the misery occasioned by the restricted demand...and the undiminished supply...had been generally and widely felt. [T]his...impossibility of speedily adjusting the supply of labour proportionally to variations in the rate of wages...gives to these variations their peculiar and extraordinary influence over the well-being of the labouring classes.\textsuperscript{112}

Third, this long production period means that a rational self-producer must make long-term calculations that both dwarf in complexity those associated with other consumer durables and nondurables and that do not permit self-correction in midcourse because the unique commodity in question generally cannot be sold off, even at a loss, as, for example, might a house that becomes less utility-generating because the purchaser could not foresee that the neighborhood in which it is located would become less desirable after 10 or 20 years. The type of rational decision-making processes that purportedly prompts consumers to purchase toothpaste or
even expensive automobiles is precluded if "[b]y the time a parent finishes discovering whether he really likes bringing up his first child, he has already had his last [and b]y the time it is clear what kind of world the children will live in—a question relevant to whether they should be brought into it—the children are grown...."113

Fourth, parents self-finance their output of offspring by means of installment payments that promote self-delusion concerning the ultimate costs. They do not, therefore, need any credit rating despite their failure to have made full disclosure to themselves regarding total cost over the lifetime of the transaction. Indeed, survey evidence suggests that parents “vastly underestimate” the amounts they spend on children even within the previous year. Whereas urban middle-class parents thought they were spending one-seventh of their income on their two children, estimates of actual direct costs averaged two-fifths of earned income.114 Parents’ underestimation of the opportunity costs of procreation in terms of foregone income, traditionally a function of the fact that the wife stops working or works less, must also be taken into account here.

Fifth, associated with this self-production is the further “fundamental distinction between children and commodities” that the cost of the former is a function of the family’s income insofar as it is plausible to assume that a child “cannot be brought up at a much lower level of living than that of his parents.”115 Nevertheless, in some proletarian cultures inegalitarian consumption patterns can modify the parents’ material deprivation. In early-twentieth-century England, for example: “Whatever it was that went to make the lower-working-class home ‘cosy,’ parents had first, often sole, rights in it.... To many people the idea of sharing food and possessions equitably with their children would have seemed preposterous....”116 Sociopsychological pressures to procreate may be supraclass in character, yet they also assume specific class forms. Lee Rainwater’s survey of working-class attitudes toward family planning in the 1950s in the United States is particularly revealing because it unearthed or at least constructs patterns of passivity and fatalism that have subsequently been attributed to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients, who are perceived as the root of the large-family poverty problem.117 Whereas the former group of relatively low-wage workers accepted their fate largely within a framework of unsubsidized income from employment, welfare mothers are the arch-Malthusian targets of demographic debate.118

The economic intermediaries that discriminate between solvent and insolvent demand for Audis and Bentleys cannot prevent parents who “cannot afford” a child from creating one. The freedom to self-create any number of children is, in contrast, so “sacrosanct” that it, “even in the face of financial difficulties, receives widespread moral (and, if necessary, tangible) encouragement.... In fact, by creating public support for the dominance of family ‘values’ over economic rationality, reproductive and social institutions are geared to prevent economic factors from inhibiting reproduction.” Becker’s analogy also collapses when confronted with the impossible imputation to parents of the legal
right and social-psychological and moral ability to equalize the marginal utilities per dollar of consumption by reconfiguring their choices upon discovering that an incremental child-durable turned out to generate less utility than they had predicted.119

Consequently, the only obstacle standing between financially impecunious but fecund self-employed procreators and their self-made consumer durable is Malthus’s pseudo-class-conscious admonition, echoed by John Stuart Mill,120 that: “A labourer who marries without being able to support a family may in some respects be considered as an enemy to all his fellow-laborers.”121 In the absence of strict compliance with such counsel, however, Becker’s hypothesis must deal with the following stylized set of assumptions. People who marry procreate unreflectively because having children is simply what married people do and children help cement the relationship.122 In the face of such normative pressures, once people have decided to marry, they cease weighing procreational advantages and disadvantages123: “In that respect alone the idea of some utilitarian calculus is totally inappropriate for describing the cognition involved in having some children.” Moreover, parents report that they believe that they have little or no control over the rising cost of children, not because the prices of the commodities and services that they buy for them have increased more rapidly than the rate of inflation, but because culturally coerced behavioral standards require them to extend the scope of such acquisitions and to move to ever higher levels of quality.124 Indeed, given the facts that children are very expensive125 and that parents are often unaware of how expensive they are or will be, it becomes plausible that “[i]f economic factors were decisive, no one in modern society would have any children.”126 And even where economic costs and benefits do influence fertility decisions, “they do so because couples believe and accept that it is important” to consider them.127 Thus outside of a specific socio-historical and class-oriented ideology mandating continuous “inflation of child costs geared to the unlimited demands of a symbolic system of prestige and deference,”128 such linkages cannot be adequately understood.

The new household economics also fails to engage the insight that because some level of procreation is socially prescribed, “the extent to which the level of resources may influence the level of childbearing is culturally restricted just as the concern for resources itself is influenced by social norms.”129 Thus if parents would produce and consume the same number of children regardless of their income, that is, if the number of children is the independent variable and parents accommodate their standard of living to that number;130 and if, finally, the total cost imposed by a child (including college education) may quantitatively approach that of a house mortgage—must children not be viewed as very bizarre commodities? Even a lower-income husband-wife family (with annual income below $32,000) is estimated to spend $92,000 on a child through age 17, while a higher-income family (with income above $52,000) spends almost twice that amount.131 After all, few consumers would take out three or four mortgages within a few years of one another. Yet the average two-parent family in the early 1980s could expect to
devote almost one-quarter of its income to supporting a single child through
college—a share that rose to two-fifths for two, and two-thirds for four children.
The sums involved would have been sufficient, if they had instead been invested
at the then prevailing historically high interest rates, to have permitted the parents
to retire at age 47.132 In addition, contrary to Becker’s conceptualization of fertility
decisions, procreators are in social reality not free to make any combinations of, or
trade-offs between, numbers of children and money spent per child because class-
and income-specific social conventions culturally constrict the range of choice.
Thus, as a friendly critic remarked, “not even Becker...considers himself free to
choose either two children who go to university or four children who stop their
education after high school.”133 In other words, to the extent that each social
stratum’s standard of living is controlled by its “folkways,” individual members
cannot arbitrarily violate these societally given consumption standards without
risking significant loss of social standing.134

The conceptualization of fertility decisions within the framework of homo
œconomicus is also significantly complicated by the fact that in many millions of
instances birth is still not only not the product of a decision but counter-
intentional.135 Some demographers’ and sociologists’ disbelief that “people in
industrial society...have children...because they do not know how to avoid having
children”136 is misplaced. As the U.S. Congress found in 1970: “The problems of
excess fertility for the poor result to a large extent from the inaccessibility of family
planning information and services.”137 That scholarly skepticism is certainly wrong
with regard to contraception; and although many who fail to contracept may know
of the existence of abortion, they may not possess the requisite social knowledge
or money to have one.138 As the U.S. Surgeon General noted in connection with
the finding that 57 percent of all births in the United States were unplanned or
unwanted, overpriced long-term contraceptives deprive poor women of several of
the most effective ways of avoiding pregnancies.139

Despite the broad evidence that individual, let alone class, socioeconomic
rationality has not always reigned supreme over working-class procreativity, some
social scientists, eager to refute “the functionalist assumptions of modernization
theorists” and “trickle-down” arguments that the working class imitates the fertility
patterns of the bourgeoisie with a lag, find it “important to stress the rationality and
independence of working-class behavior.”140 And although Philippe Aries
exempted workers without the prospect of social mobility, he depicted the West
from the nineteenth century on as having subjected procreation to “the methods of
rational and scientific organization, a sort of biological Taylorism.”141

Contemporary surveys, however, cast considerable doubt on the absolute
assertion that “[f]ertility does not just happen. The number of children born to a
man and a woman reflects a family strategy. [P]eople have large families out of
desire, not ignorance....”142 U.S. survey data from the first half of the 1960s
revealed that 17 percent of the births of all (married) respondents were
characterized as unwanted compared to 36 percent among the near-poor and poor
and 42 percent among the poor alone; among near-poor and poor blacks, the share
reached 51 percent. Another survey from the same period revealed that especially lower-income couples had unwillingly arrived at a fourth child. Later data showed that among ever-married black women 15 to 44 years old with incomes below the federal poverty threshold, the proportion of children born who were unwanted at birth was 43.8, 21.0, and 35.3 percent during the five years preceding 1973, 1982, and 1988 respectively. The corresponding figures for black women with incomes at 200 percent or higher of the poverty level were 18.0, 9.6, and 14.1 percent respectively—only marginally lower than the proportions among poor white women. As demographers noted, because the poverty definition incorporates family size, "many couples would not have been classified as poor were it not for their having had unwanted children. Consequently, the results indicate the coincidence of poverty and unwanted births rather than a propensity of the 'poor' to have unwanted children." Unplanned pregnancies—that is, births of children whom parents may in principle want but not at that juncture in the procreators' lives—warrant inclusion because they too can plunge the parents into irreversible poverty if they are as yet economically incapable of sustaining a family.

Against the background of such procreational behavior, Judith Blake, from a quasi-Darwinian perspective, concluded that:

Pro-natalist motives have helped societies survive thousands of years of want. The institutional context responsible for such motives is geared to combat the anti-natalist effect of poverty with desires that relentlessly override perceptions of current realities and demand the production of children in spite of everything. Regardless of child quality, or the toll it takes of individuals, this institutional complex concentrates on insuring the biological survival of the species.... We must recognize...that as yet we have no control over the social context of reproduction comparable to the control over consumer durables provided by the credit system.

Precisely how the linkage between cyclical and secular economic developments and individual rational procreational decisions and that between the latter and macrodemographic and -economic growth are supposed to operate has never been adequately explicated. Thus, for example, the third British population census of 1821 asserted that: "The Manufacturing Population is naturally on the Increase; not only as every short period of prosperity and increased wages produces imprudent Marriages, but also because in many Manufactures, Children are able to maintain themselves at an early age, and so to entail little expense on their Parents, to the obvious encouragement of marriage," One possible interpretation of the population counters’ story, then, is that workers were irrationally responding to short-term signs of prosperity by shortsightedly producing additional children, who might turn into good investments, contributing within a few years more income to the household than they cost, but who might also stop earning altogether at the next downturn.
By the same token, at least in the United States during the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, "the earnings of young children were of decisive importance in enabling laboring families to secure a property stake in the community"—or at least to survive. Or, as the young Engels put it, "children are like trees, which superabundantly reimburse the expenditure spent on them...." Unmentioned, to be sure, is the further possibility that the production and mass labor marketing of successive contingents of extraordinarily low-paid child-competitors might, Sisyphus-like, perversely reduce aggregate family income. As George Bernard Shaw observed toward the end of the century:

The commodity which the proletarian sells is one over the production of which he has practically no control. He is himself driven to produce it by an irresistible impulse...to multiply men so that their exchange value falls slowly and surely until it disappears altogether.... This is the condition of our English labourers to-day: they are no longer even dirt cheap: they are valueless, and can be had for nothing. The proof is the existence of the unemployed, who can find no purchaser.

How then are workers supposed to be in a position to determine whether they will be able to support any (let alone how many) children during the next 22 years as well as to gauge future demand for their and their children's labor power if such long-term aggregate supply and demand conditions are unpredictable? "Even if the labourer possessed...an irrational passion for dispassionate calculation, the task of estimating his probable family income and even expenditure in the foreseeable future would tax the ingenuity of a trained economic forecaster, if only because of the irregularity of his prospective employment and earnings."

NOTES

4. Chapter 8 presents much more detailed and varied sets of data.
5. William Graham Sumner, *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals* 309-10 (1940 [1906]).
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19. Calculated according to [U.S.] Commissioner of Labor, *Sixth Annual Report, 1890: Cost of Production: Iron, Steel, Coal, Etc.,* tab. XXIII.A.-B. at 1356 (rev. ed. 1891). There is a discrepancy between the U.S. data in part A and B of this table; although the lower figures are used here, even according to the higher figures, only in 22 percent of all families with children were the latter at work.


23. Allan Nevins, *Ford: The Times, the Man, the Company* 519 (1954) (quoting from the minutes of the special meeting of the Employers’ Association of Detroit which Detroit Juvenile Court Judge Henry Hulbert addressed on Jan. 16, 1912).


44. B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress: A Second Social Survey of York* 155-60 (1941). The two surveys were not linked and did not even use the same definition of poverty.
55. *Ibid.*, tab. 19 at 76.


72. Seccombe, *A Millennium of Family Change* at 32.


80. The total fertility rate is a hypothetical projection of the average number of children that women entering their childbearing age in a given year will have during their lifetimes based on the actual age-specific reproduction of fertile women in that year. Because birth rates vary from year to year, the probabilities of childbearing change as each cohort of women passes through its fertile period. Consequently, the actual average number of children ever born to a cohort frequently deviates considerably from that projected by the total fertility rate. Larry Barnett, *Population Policy and the U.S. Constitution* 4-5 (1982).


92. Ibid. at 168.
107. For example, the National Restaurant Association, whose members employ more than 9 million workers in the United States, have proposed fewer restrictions on their employment of 14-year-old school children. "Employers Seek to Ease Restrictions on Teen Work," Labor Relations Reporter 147:282-83 (Oct. 31, 1994).
110. Thomas De Quincey, The Logic of Political Economy, in idem, Political Economy and Politics 118-294 at 221 (David Masson ed., 1970 [1844]).


118. In the long course of that debate the terms of the discourse have remained remarkably constant although the groups to which the aberrant procreative labels are affixed change. For example, the German socialists’ chief pre-World War I theoretician, Karl Kautsky, in an extraordinarily dull reprise of his quasi-Malthusian, non-Marxist work on population 30 years earlier, offered a particularly lurid description of contemporary lumpenproletarians, whom he compared to savages. Their completely indiscriminate sexual intercourse, however, was accompanied by a fertility that was limited neither by life circumstances, as with savages, nor by possessions, as with the higher classes. Moreover, the advent of additional children did not worsen their condition; on the contrary, a larger contingent of offspring actually promoted their livelihood—living on charity—by appealing to donors’ pity. Karl Kautsky, *Vermehrung und Entwicklung in Natur und Gesellschaft* 180-81 (1910).


120. See below ch. 3.


123. Julian Simon’s pollyannish view that people everywhere implement Malthus’s preventive checks in response to income restraints is more a rhetorical debating point than an empirically useful argument. Julian Simon, *The Ultimate Resource* 177-87
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(1981). That he cites Rainwater, And the Poor Get Children for the proposition is, in light of the latter's unrelenting disclosure of the self-abandonment of the poor to their procreational fate, preposterous.

124. John Caldwell, “Mass Education as a Determinant of the Timing of Fertility Decline,” Pop. & Dev. Rev. 6(2):225-55 at 227-28 (June 1980); Samuel Preston, “Changing Values and Falling Birth Rates,” in Below-Replacement Fertility in Industrial Societies: Causes, Consequences, Policies 176-95 at 186 (Kingsley Davis et al. eds., 1986); George Alter, “Theories of Fertility Decline: A Nonspecialist’s Guide to the Current Debate,” in The European Experience of Declining Fertility, 1859-1970: The Quiet Revolution 13-27 at 16 (John Gillis et al. eds., 1992). What flaws the orthodox microeconomic argument that the costs of children are exogenously given is its failure to incorporate the circumstance of overarching importance that as self-producers parents can initiate the process of production despite the fact that any credit intermediary would inform them that bankruptcy of the enterprise is the inexorable outcome.

125. Town & Country magazine claims that the total cost of raising a child to the age of 18 is $679,483 including such items as $10,000 for an automobile. “Costly Children” N.Y. Times Magazine, June 26, 1994, at 12.


129. Busfield & Paddon, Thinking About Children at 41.

130. Ironically, this reproductive behavioral guideline corresponds to Catholic precept, which counsels believers to adjust living standards to requirements of a larger family rather than subordinating the latter to desires for ever higher levels of personal consumption. See Blake, “Income and Reproductive Motivation” at 194-99.


132. Lawrence Olson, Costs of Children 55-58 (1983). Even for the 1920s it was estimated that an average family devoted the equivalent of three to four years of the family’s income raising one child. Louis Dublin & Alfred Lotka, The Money Value of a Man 22-40 (1930); idem, ibid. 44-58 (rev. ed. 1946).

133. James Duesenberry, “Comment,” in Demographic and Economic Change in Developed Countries at 231-34 at 233.


138. For survey data on teenagers' knowledge of contraception and the much greater frequency with which poor teenagers have children, see Colin McMahon & Carol Jouzaitis, “Taboos Leave Many Teens Unprotected,” Chicago Tribune, May 24, 1994, at 1 (Lexis); Rhonda Hillbery, “A Silver Lining?” Minneapolis Star Tribune, June 7, 1994, at 1A (Lexis).


147. Reed & McIntosh, “Costs of Children” at 346. Even intentional procreation shortly after marriage is said to lead to reduced lifetime accumulation of assets insofar as parents who become subject to such money and time pressure are unable to “invest” more in their own education. Ronald Freedman & Lolagene Coombs, “Childspacing and Family Economic Position,” Am. Sociological Rev. 31 (5):631-48 at 632 (Oct. 1966).


150. Stephen Thermstrom, “Is There Really a New Poor? in Poverty: Views From the Left 83, 90 (Jeremy Lardner & Irving Howe eds., 1970). See also Eileen Boris, Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States 175 (1994). A study of the southern sharecropper in the United States revealed that he had four times as many children as farm owners because “[t]he more children he had, the bigger the crop he could grow, the greater the share for the landlord, and therefore the more likely a landlord would be to offer him employment.” B. Gröger, “The Meaning of Land in a Southern Rural Community: Differences Between Blacks and Whites,” in Farm Work and Fieldwork: American Agriculture in Anthropological Perspective 189, 199 (Michael Chibnik ed., 1987).

peasant is delighted with every calf that his cow brings him, he counts with gusto the number of young ones that a sow produces for him..., but he is gloomy when his wife bestows upon him a new increment in addition to the number of offspring, whom he believes he can bring up without heavy cares—and that number cannot be great...." August Bebel, *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* 136-37 (1973 [1879]).

152. This unintended consequence may still flow from the reproductive behavior of migrant farm workers in the United States. Linder, *Migrant Workers and Minimum Wages* at 54-55, 87-88, 252-54.
