EMMA GOLDMAN

The social aspects of birth control (1916)

It has been suggested that to create one genius nature uses all of her resources and takes a hundred years for her dirimeous. If that be true, it takes nature evens to longer to create a great idea. After all, in creating a genius nature concentrates on one personality whereas an idea must eventually become the heritage of the race and must needs be more difficult to mould.

It is just one hundred and fifty years ago when a great man conceived a great idea, Robert Thomas Malthus, the father of Birth Control. It should that have taken so long to bring to the people the idea that the earth is not fertile or rich enough to supply the needs of an excessive race. Certainly if we will look across to the trenched and battlefields of Europe we will find that in a measure his premise was correct. But I feel confident that if Malthus would live to-day he would agree with all social students and revolutionists that the masses of people continue to be poor and the rich grow ever richer, it is not because the earth is lacking in fertility and richness to supply the needs even of an excessive race, but because the earth is

under taken by quack doctors, ignorant midwives in secrecy and in haste. Yet the poets and the politicians sing of motherhood. A greater crime was never perpetrated upon woman.

Our moralists know about it, yet they persist in behold in an indiscriminate breeding of children. They tell us that to limit offspring is entirely a modern tendency because the modern woman is loose in her morals and wishes to shirk responsibility. In reply to this, it is necessary to point out that the tendency to limit offspring is as old as the race. We have as the authority for this content an eminent German physician, Dr. Theilhaber who has compiled historic data to prove that the tendency was prevalent among the Hebrews, the Egyptians, the Persians and many tribes of American Indians. The facts given by Dr. Theilhaber who has used the most hideous methods rather than to bring an unwanted child into the world. Dr. Theilhaber enumerates fifty-seven methods. This data is of great importance in as much as it dispels the superstition that woman wants to become a mother of a large family. No, it is not because woman is lacking in responsibility, but because she has too much of the latter that she demands to know how to prevent conception. Never in the history of the world has woman been so race conscious as she is to-day. Never before has she been able to see in the child, not only in her child, but every child, the unit of society, the channel through which man and woman must pass; the strongest factor in the breading of the race and the reason that Birth Control rests upon such solid ground.

The light and its proclaiming in a clarion voice that she will no longer be a party to the crime of bringing hapless children into the world only to be gaunt through the wheel of life, only to be shred in trenches and battlefields. And who is to say her nay? After all it is woman who is risking her health and sacrificing her youth in the reproduction of the race. Surely she ought to be in a position to decide how many children she should bring into the world, whether they be poor and the rich grow ever richer, it is not because the earth is lacking in fertility and richness to supply the needs even of an excessive race, but because the earth is

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...But it is not woman alone who is beginning to realize the importance of Birth Control. Men, too, especially working men, have learned to see in large families a millstone around their necks, deliberately imposed upon them by the reactionary forces in society because a large family paralyzes the brain and burhams the muscles of the masses of working men. Nothing so binds the workers to the block as a brood of children and that is exactly what the opponents of Birth Control want. Wretched as the earnings of a man with a large family are, he cannot risk even that little, so he continues in the rut, compromises and cringes before his master, just to earn barely enough to feed the many mouths. He dare not join a revolutionary organization; he dare not go on strike; he dare not express an opinion. Masses of workers have awakened to the necessity of Birth Control as a means of freeing themselves from the terrible yoke and bondage of enforced pregnancy; a movement which demands the right for every child to be born of choice; a movement which shall help free labor from its eternal dependence; a movement which shall usher into the world a new kind of motherhood. I now and here declare war upon this system and shall not rest until the path has been cleared for a free motherhood and a healthy, joyous and happy childhood.

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monopolized in the hands of the few to the exclusion of the many. [...] In so called good times, capitalism swallows masses of people to throw them out again in times of “industrial depression.” This superfluous human mass, which is swelling the ranks of the unemployed and which represents the greatest menace in modern times, is called by our bourgeois political economists the labor margin. In the past and to a large extent with the institution known as capitalistic civilization will be undermined. And so the political economists, together with all sponsors of the capitalist regime, are in favor of a large and excessive race and are therefore opposed to Birth Control.

[...] Secondly, there is the mental awakening of woman, that plays no small part in behalf of Birth Control. For ages she has carried her burdens. Has done her duty a thousand fold more than the soldier on the battlefield. After all, the soldier’s business is to take life. For that he is paid by the State, eulogized by political charlatans and upheld by public hysteria. But woman’s function is to give life, yet neither the state nor politicians nor public opinion have ever made the slightest provision in return for the life woman has given.

For ages she has been on her knees before the altar of duty as imposed by God, by Capitalism, by the State, and by Morality. To-day she has awakened from her age-long sleep. She has shaken herself free from the nightmare of the past; she has turned her face towards existence by preventing more children from coming into the world.

Last, but not least, a change in the relation of the sexes, though not embracing very large numbers of people, is still making itself felt among a very considerable minority. In the past and to a large extent with the average man to-day, woman continues to be a mere object, a means to an end; largely a physical means and end. But there are men who want more than that from woman; who have come to realize that if every male were emancipated from the superstitions of the past nothing would yet be changed in the social structure so long as woman had not taken her place with him in the great social struggle. Slowly but surely these men have learned that if a woman wastes her substance in preparing for and during child-bearing, she has little time left for anything else. Least of all has she the time for the questions which absorb and stir the father of her children. Out of physical exhaustion and nervous stress she becomes the obstacle in the man’s way and often his bitterest enemy. It is then for his own protection and also for his need of the companion and friend in the woman he loves that a great many men want her to be relieved from the terrible imposition of constant reproduction of life, that therefore they are in favor of Birth Control.

From whatever angle, then, the question of Birth Control may be considered, it is the most dominant issue of modern times and as such it cannot be driven back by persecution, imprisonment or a conspiracy of silence.

We are told that so long as the law on the statute books makes the discussion of preventives a crime, these preventives must not be discussed. In reply I wish to say beside it is not the Birth Control Movement, but the law, which will have to go. After all, that is what laws are for, to be made and unmade. How dare they demand that life shall submit to them? Just because some ignorant bigot in his own limitation of mind and heart succeeded in passing a law at the time when men and women were in the throats of religious and moral superstition, must we be bound by it for the rest of our lives? I readily understand why judges and jailers shall be bound by it. It means their livelihood; their function in society. But even judges sometimes progress. I call your attention to the decision given in behalf of the issue of Birth Control by Judge Gates of Portland, Oregon. “It seems to me that the trouble with our people is that they are ignorant and prudish. Ignorance and prudery have always been the millstones around the neck of progress. We all know that things are wrong in society; that we are suffering from many evils but we have not the nerve to get up and admit it, and when some person brings to our attention something we already know, we feign modesty and feel outraged.” That certainly is the trouble with most of our law makers and with all those who are opposed to Birth Control.

[...] Can you blame me if I am an anarchist and have no use for laws? Also, I wish to point out the utter stupidity of the American court. Supposedly justice is monopolized in the hands of the few to the exclusion of the many. [...] In so called good times, capitalism swallows masses of people to throw them out again in times of “industrial depression.” This superfluous human mass, which is swelling the ranks of the unemployed and which represents the greatest menace in modern times, is called by our bourgeois political economists the labor margin. They will have it that under no circumstances must the labor margin diminish, else the sacred institution known as capitalist civilization will be undermined. And so the political economists, together with all sponsors of the capitalist regime, are in favor of a large and excessive race and are therefore opposed to Birth Control.

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