There are good and bad wives; [but] there are only good mothers. A bad mother, if such exists, is against nature. One would not know how to classify her, nor understand her.

Jules Simon, La femme du vingtième siècle, 1892

Woman, wife, mother, nature. In the decades before 1914, the declining birthrate in France brought these four terms to the forefront of an intense controversy.\(^1\) For Jules Simon, senator for life in the French Third Republic from 1875 to 1896, the connections between these four words were both unambiguous and yet, somehow disturbing. Good and bad wives, yes, he seemed to say, but not bad mothers, surely. A bad mother would not be a mother at all, perhaps not really a woman—how would we classify her? Simon’s willful lack of comprehension, expressed in the...
face of the “bad mother, if such exists,” can only be understood in light of his quite evident assumption that maternity defined the essence of womanhood. But Simon’s intriguing blend of confident assertion and nagging doubt are signs of what critic Mary Poovey has usefully termed “ideological work,” an attempt to find soothing solutions to perplexing social problems in a comfortably defined natural realm. Simon’s statement was not made in entirely good faith—he and his republican colleagues in the National Assembly had demonstrated their belief in “bad mothers” by supporting a law in 1889 which allowed the administration of Public Assistance to take charge of children who had been “morally abandoned” by their parents. Simon’s statement operated in another register entirely—it was meant to reassure his readers that motherhood remained an undisputed social obligation in the face of a great deal of evidence that French women were choosing to have children in ever smaller numbers.

Few who noticed the declining birthrate in France at the turn of the century could refrain from commenting on it. By 1910 one writer could observe, “One can hardly open a newspaper or a review without finding an article on depopulation, on its causes and its effects, and on the remedies which must be implemented.” Despite the cacophony of conflicting explanations and cures, however, one issue stood at the center of the debate: the relationship between a woman’s reproductive capacity and the social and political aspirations of the nation. The good doctor Boutan, a character in Émile Zola’s novel Fécondité (1899), captured this central theme when he warned the young hero, Mathieu Froment, of the dangers that he and his wife faced if they did not allow her to conceive:

Think about it! . . . One cannot deceive an organ with impunity. Imagine a stomach which one continually tantalized with an indigestible lure whose presence unceasingly called forth the blood while offering nothing to digest. Every function which is not exercised according to its normal order becomes a permanent source of danger. You stimulate a woman, contenting her only with the spasm, and you have only satisfied her desire, which is simply the enticing stimulant; you have not acceded to fertilization, which is the goal, the necessary and indispensable act. And you are surprised when this betrayed and abused organism, diverted from its proper use, reveals itself to be the seat of terrible disorders, disgraces and perversions! . . . Listen well! my friend, here is the root of the problem.

Zola’s metaphor of the stomach, coming from the mouth of Dr. Boutan, established a series of relations that took with them the prestige of medical truths: organ is to function as woman is to reproduction, and hunger is to the maintenance of the body as desire is to the maintenance of the species. These metaphors, of course, functioned by way of a subsidiary synecdoche—a tacit substitution of “woman” for “womb” was operative in the phrase “you stimulate a woman, contenting her only with the spasm.” The ease with which the doctor moved from the level of organs to organisms, and the condensation that this effected on the body of “woman,” not only reduced the figure of “woman” to her sex but also provided her life with an essential linearity, summarized in a progress toward fertilization. The move from the level of organisms to populations in the last sentence carried the moral further, establishing the bodies of women as repositories of future generations and linking their individual destinies with that of the species.

To the extent that Dr. Boutan’s speech was about the social significance of individual actions, that is, the decision to use contraception, Zola offered the reader a gendered commentary on the question of individual agency in sexual matters. The transitive verbs used by the doctor have men as their subjects: “woman,” and feminized terms such as “nature” or “organ,” appear only as their objects, except in cases of obvious pathology, as in the sentence “Nature deceived turns against you.” Contraception, by eliminating the necessary connection between the satisfaction of feminine desire and reproduction, threatened to disrupt the natural order which constituted men as active subjects and women as passive objects. The “permanent source of danger” alluded to by Dr. Boutan, therefore, arose from the possibility of a sexual and ultimately social agency for women outside the conventional realm of motherhood.

Dr. Boutan’s speech to Mathieu invoked a structural logic that could only conceive of a woman’s body in terms of her reproductive

5 “Songez donc! . . . on ne trompe pas impunément un organe. Imaginez-vous un estomac qu’on nourrirait d’un continué leurre, dont des corps indigestes appelleront sans cesse le sang, en ne donnant jamais rien à la digestion? Toute fonction, qui ne s’accomplit pas dans l’ordre normal, devient un danger permanent des troubles. Vous énervez la femme, vous ne contentez chez elle que le spasme, vous en restez à la satisfaction du désir, qui est simplement l’appétit générateur, sans consentir à la fécondation, qui est le but, l’acte nécessaire et indispensable. Et vous ne voulez pas que, dans cet orgaisme dupé, bousculé, détourné de son usage, se déclarent de terribles désordres, les déchéances, les perversions! . . . vous entendez bien! mon ami, tout est là. La nature trompée se révolte. Plus on trouble, plus on pervertit, plus la population s’affaiblit et se dégrade” (Émile Zola, Fécondité [Paris, 1897], 880–81).
capacity. In turn, Zola's doctor could only consider reproduction itself within the context of its significance for the collective population.  

This series of linkages, by which female bodies were established as the crucial vehicles for the continued survival of the nation, lay behind much of the writing on fertility decline in late-nineteenth-century France. The influence of this thinking can be seen in the wide range of remedies that were proposed to stem the process of "depopulation" in the decades leading up to World War I: encouragement of maternal breast feeding,  

7 assistance to mothers (both married and single), the regulation of women's employment, mandatory maternity leave for pregnant women,  

8 abrogation of the divorce law,  

9 penalties for unmarried adults, fiscal encouragements for large families,  

10 and increased penalties for abortion and the sale of contraceptive devices.  

11 With the possible exception of the divorce law, which was supported primarily by anticlerical republicans in the Chamber of Deputies, a broad consensus existed among political and civic leaders as to the desirability of such measures, all of which aimed in some way at encouraging French women to produce and nurture more children. At the turn of the century in France, therefore, the question of women's fertility became an ideological prism, refracting a multitude of ideas concerning the political order of contemporary society. Facing seemingly irrefutable evidence that the nation was no longer living as if sexuality were automatically linked to reproduction, the birthrate alarmists echoed the words of Dr. E. Maurel, who in 1896 wrote: "In our epoch, one can say that . . . in legitimate as well as illegitimate sexual relations, fertilization is not the goal but the danger."  

12 In spite of this evidence that the late-nineteenth-century fertility debate was embroiled in a larger set of social, political, and cultural transformations, twentieth-century scholars have usually seen the attention paid to the threat of "depopulation" as simply the domestic component of a renewed nationalist spirit following the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. This interpretation tended to accept the definition of the population crisis given by contemporary demographers and treated the problem in terms of France's geopolitical status in the period leading up to World War I. Seen in this light, the measures put forth by the natalist lobby appear to be a rational response to a national emergency.  

13 This refusal to examine the demographic literature for anything more than empirical data on the fertility decline resulted in a general neglect of the important role played by population experts in connecting the theme of maternal responsibility to that of national decline. It should be emphasized that the natalist position on fertility was relatively new in the second half of the nineteenth century, having replaced the Malthusian orthodoxy which had held sway between 1840 and 1870 and which had focused attention on the opposite problem: excessive population growth. Given this about-face within the literature on population in France, a closer examination of the role played by demographers in diagnosing the threat of fertility decline is necessary.

An alternative line of historical investigation attempted to place the fertility debate within the larger context of competing ideologies which made up the landscape of social politics in fin de siècle France. These historians pointed to the extent to which the natalist campaigns of the 1890s and the 1900s were the result of several simultaneous developments: the emergence of a new professional class of medical and population experts, the appearance of an organized feminist movement in France, the spread of knowledge about contraceptive tech-

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6 Of course, Zola's *Fécondité* is only one example of a widespread preoccupation with questions of female agency in nineteenth-century French literature. Critics Naomi Schor has gone so far as to assert that: "what seals the degradation of the feminine in nineteenth-century French fiction is the devastating fact that the post-revolutionary female protagonist is consistently deprived of the most minimal attribute of subjecthood" (Schor, "Unwriting Lawful," in *Breaking the Chains: Women, Theory, and French Realist Fiction* (New York, 1985), 135).


9 Attacks on the divorce law were quite common among the natalist literature, especially among the Catholic writers but also among the disciples of the sociologist Frédéric Le Play. See, for example, Georges Deherme, *Les Classes moyennes: Étude sur le parasitisme social* (Paris, 1912), 316.


niques, and a general anxiety produced by the apparent break in the
linkage between sexual practice and reproduction.\textsuperscript{14} Angus McLaren pointed out the important role played by doctors in framing the discus-
sion of female sexuality and reproduction throughout the nineteenth
century, asserting that "medical science was . . . used to substantiate
rather than to challenge old sexual stereotypes."\textsuperscript{15} McLaren explained
this collusion between social convention and medical practice as a
logical tendency of doctors to appeal to established moral standards
at a time when their own profession was seeking greater recognition
and legitimacy. Likewise, he traced the appearance of similar views
on family limitation among Catholic writers and "secular moralists."\textsuperscript{16}
McLaren's work did much to clarify the role played by priests, doc-
tors, and liberal intellectuals in reinforcing social conventions about
maternity, childbirth, and family life during this period. Neverthe-
less, important questions about the power of these social conventions
remain to be explored. In what way did these "traditional attitudes" be-
come transformed when they were recast in the language of religion,
medicine, or political economy? Did the prescriptions on individual
behavior that were a part of such traditions carry over unchanged to
the new discourses focusing on the collective responsibility of mothers
to produce children for the nation?

Historian Karen Offen examined the persistence of such "tra-
ditional" attitudes toward motherhood in her 1984 article, "Depopula-
tion, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France." Offen ar-
gued that the depopulation controversy was inextricably linked to a
larger debate concerning the role of women in society, and her work
effectively demonstrated that "the woman question" was not simply an
issue broached by feminists but was in fact a preoccupation of a wide
range of political and moral commentators, including socialists, repub-
licans, and Catholics. From these sources, Offen traced the emergence
of a moderate feminism in France which based its claims for women's
citizenship on their social role as mothers. Because of its emphasis on
the importance of family and maternity, this domestic ideology won
support from many republicans, who saw in this position an effective
bulwark against a conservative attempt to frame the "woman question"
in terms of a defense of "traditional" patriarchal values.\textsuperscript{17}

Ultimately, both the fertility debate and the discussion of feminism
in late-nineteenth-century France posed the same series of fundamen-
tal questions: what type of agency should women exercise in society?
Should they be allowed to define themselves as citizens and subjects
of the nation according to their own volition? Or had nature provided
women with a maternal obligation that was independent of their de-
sires and aspirations? The fact that moderate feminists and repub-
lican natalists came up with similar answers to these questions, as Offen
argued, indicates how difficult it was for French feminists to base their
claims for political participation on notions of individual right rather
than collective good. But this rapprochement between moderate femi-
nists and natalists must also be seen in terms of a widespread consensus
in French society that the problem to be solved in the "fertility crisis"
involved defining the proper social dimension of motherhood. How
did this consensus become so powerful? What possible constellation of
ideas placed women's bodies and their relation to reproduction at the
center of social debate in France?

The key to answering this question lies first in the literature of
the population sciences itself. From the 1860s on, as the influence of
Malthus on French population studies waned, a growing community
of demographers, hygienists, and political economists turned to exam-
ine the problem of natality. The participants in the fertility debate thus
had access to an unprecedented amount of medical and demographic
information, which must be analyzed for its effect on the outcome of
the debate. By examining the demographic literature which brought
the fertility decline to public attention and identifying the extent to
which these sciences participated in the characterization of mother-
hood as a woman's "natural" destiny, we can better understand how ma-
ternity came to be viewed as a social responsibility in late-nineteenth-
century France. How did the presentation of this information to the
public influence the search for political and legislative remedies to
the crisis? To what degree did the language of late-nineteenth-century
French population studies contribute to the inordinate amount of at-
tention paid to the question of women and their reproductive capacity?

\textsuperscript{14} See Karen Offen, "Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France," American Historical Review 89 (June 1984): 648–76; and McLaren, Sexuality and Social Order.
\textsuperscript{15} McLaren, Sexuality and Social Order, 46.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 31–43, 65–76.
\textsuperscript{17} Offen's view, however, that this familial strategy "became a vehicle not only for improving
the status of women but also for subverting the sexual system from within," remains problematic

("Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism," 675). Did Offen mean by this that French feminists
were aware of a possible contradiction between the acceptance of their culture's valorization of
motherhood and their own aspirations as independent subjects and citizens and yet were willing
to accept such a contradiction in exchange for short-term political gains? By implying that this
was the case, and despite the welcome attempt to nuance the complicated picture of sexual poli-
tics in fin de siècle France, this aspect of Offen's argument remains rooted in an essentially linear
vision of the history of feminism, which must explain away divergences from the path to the
present situation as "strategies" or ruses which ultimately worked for the betterment of women.
Gender and the Fertility Index

In 1886 the pioneering French demographer Emile Levasseur wrote:

One can read the great facts of history and above all the economic history of France inscribed under the curve of births: natality carries the imprint of politics. The population, which lives off of wealth and prospers from labor and security is a sensitive thermometer, affected by all social, political, and commercial crises. . . . Natality carries the imprint of history.18

When Levasseur claimed that natality bears the trace of history and politics, he meant, of course, that the birthrate reflected in some large degree the social and political organization of the nation. But the statistics for measuring birth bore other traces as well. Like other attempts to harness the social process within a scientific terminology, the statistical description of fertility in late-nineteenth-century France carried with it an assortment of connotations, all of which indicate the extent to which the science of demography and the demographers themselves were not impervious to the ideological visions that were the culture's common currency.

Demographers of the period reinforced a socially overdetermined connection between womanhood and motherhood by defining the fertility index as a ratio between the number of births and the total population of women of childbearing age. Twentieth-century demography textbooks still find the ratio of births per female population superior to the crude birthrate (a simple ratio between births and total number of inhabitants regardless of sex), because in the former "the denominator is more nearly restricted to those actually 'exposed' to the risk of childbirth."19 Nevertheless, the origins of the fertility index amounted to more than a simple story of rational improvement and greater empirical precision. The very notion of "childbearing age" or "reproductive years" places individuals in a tightly defined life-cycle trajectory that presumes motherhood as the biological destiny of women. Furthermore, the bearing of children could only be conceived of as a "risk" to which women alone are "exposed" in a culture which assumes (a) that women have little or uncertain control over their reproductive lives and (b) that men play no measurably responsible role in the process which produces children for demographic observation. Both of these

assumptions were in fact quite acceptable to the European statisticians who invented the measures for natality and fertility in the nineteenth century. They should not be accepted, however, as transhistorical and universally applicable descriptions of the objective reality of reproduction. On the contrary, historians should be aware that these empirical conventions for measuring fertility codified into scientific terms an asymmetrical relation of men and women to the process of reproduction that had implications far beyond the relatively limited scope of the population sciences. Understanding the extent to which a demographic conception of fertility contributed to the definition of this asymmetry will help clarify exactly what was at stake in the debate over the declining birthrate in late-nineteenth-century France.

Historians of demography agree that the development of precise measures for fertility lagged far behind that of other demographic indexes in the nineteenth century. Jacques and Michel Dupâquier pointed out that the modern conception of the mortality table had been very nearly worked out by the end of the eighteenth century by Per Wargentin in Germany, Richard Price in England, and Emmanuel Duvillard in France.20 In contrast, well into the nineteenth century statisticians continued to measure births in relatively crude terms by modern standards: usually as the ratio of baptisms per marriage or alternatively as the number of inhabitants per baptism.21 Such measures provided only very rough indications for the purposes of comparison, because they did not take into account the differences in age structure or sex ratios which demographers now use to determine the "differential fertility" of given populations. As late as 1856 the Statistique générale de France defined the "fertility [fécondité] of the population" as the ratio between the number of births and the number of inhabitants, with its only caveat being to subtract stillbirths from the numerator.22 Later writers would use the term taux de natalité for this ratio, reserving the term fécondité for figures arrived at by isolating the female population.23

Historian and demographer Hervé Le Bras argued that the un-

21 Ibid., 365. An example of this tendency in the nineteenth century is Benoist de Chateauneuf’s index of births per marriage, which by modern standards was more precise than the crude birthrate but which did not attempt to limit the denominator to the female population. See Benoist de Chateauneuf, "Notice sur l'intensité de la fécondité en Europe au commencement du dix-neuvième siècle," Annales des sciences naturelles 9 (1836): 431-50, esp. 449.
22 Statistique de la France, mouvement de la population en 1851, 1852 et 1853 (Strasbourg, 1856), xvi.
23 The Dupâquières credit the English statistician William Farr for the invention of the natality index in 1870 (Histoire de la démographie, 369). See, however, the discussion of J. Matthews Duncan below.
willingness of nineteenth-century demographers to treat the question of fertility was due to "the mystery, the scandal, and the anxiety which surrounded contraception, particularly in a country such as France." 24 The Dupâquieriers disagreed with Le Bras, asserting instead that the delay merely reflected "the insufficiencies of descriptive statistics: because no country, with the exception of Sweden, registered the age of the mothers at birth, demographic analysis lacked the materials necessary for its exercise." 25 By claiming that the development of precise measures of fertility was simply dependent upon the technical collection of certain types of data, however, the Dupâquieriers omitted an important historical dimension of the problem: what conceptual change rendered the established procedures obsolete and necessitated the gathering of new information? Le Bras's argument, that developments in the population sciences were related to and obstructed by other types of protocols, is more promising but needs to be pushed farther. The "mystery" which surrounded the issue of sexuality, reproduction, and contraception in nineteenth-century France did more than obscure the logic of today's demographic procedures and delay their development. More importantly, powerfully charged preconceptions of sex, birth, and motherhood permeated the work of social scientists and played an important role in linking the particular circumstances of an individual woman's decision to have children with the needs and requirements of the national community. Ultimately, as the empirical techniques for measuring fertility were "perfected," reproduction came to be seen as a social responsibility.

Within the Malthusian paradigm that dominated French political economy prior to the 1860s, such a connection between low fertility and the demands of the nation was unthinkable. 26 Malthus took sexual desire to be the constant motivating force in human relations, and he saw the birth of new generations as the natural expression of this sexual engine. 27 According to Malthus, the power of this drive was such that populations would quickly outstrip their resources if they were not subject to positive or indirect checks. In other words, Malthusians worried more about excessive population expansion than the dangers of population decline. This view appealed to many political economists, because it allowed them to explain the misery that accompanied industrialization and urban development at midcentury in terms of a failure on the part of the working classes to control their own fertility. 28 At the same time, this tendency of Malthusians to see the population problem almost entirely through the filter of class prevented them from interpreting evidence of fertility decline as anything but a positive development. Until the 1860s, in fact, the Malthusian influence over French economic thinking permeated both the upper reaches of the academies and the political administration, effectively minimizing the dangers of underpopulation while simultaneously encouraging a tendency to treat fertility solely within the context of working-class poverty. 29

Malthus's treatment of reproduction did not have a particularly strong gendered component to it beyond the common familialist bias that one would expect from a writer of Malthus's time, place, and circumstance. In Malthus's own writing, gender played an important role in several respects: in his justification of the double standard for adultery 30 and in his intriguing account of sexual desire, 31 for example.

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25 Dupâquier and Dupâquier, Histoire de la démographie, 355, 365. In support of the Dupâquier one could cite Major Graham, William Farr's patron at the British General Register Office, who complained in 1845 that "the statistics of a country in which the age of a mother at marriage, and at the birth of her children, is not recorded, must always remain imperfect, and leave us without the means of solving some of the most important social questions." (cited by J. Duncan Mathews, "On the Laws of the Fertility of Women," Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh 24 (1867): 288).
26 On the rejection of Malthusianism in France after 1860 see Yves Charbit, Du Malthusianism au populationisme: Les Économistes français et la population, 1840–1870 (Paris, 1981), 24. Charbit argued that the transition in French economic thought from Malthusian pessimism to support for population growth occurred before the development of an overt sense of nationalist competition with Germany, and he argued that this shift was due to a combination of factors, including the economic and demographic conjuncture in which the French found themselves in the 1850s and 1860s; an improvement in the standards of living among workers that minimized the significance of poverty in treatments of the social question; and a renewed spirit of colonial expansion, which ran counter to Malthusian assumptions about population growth.
27 In Malthus's own words: "The passion between the sexes has appeared in every age to be so nearly the same that it may always be considered, in algebraic language, as a given quantity." (Thomas Malthus, An Essay on the Principle of Population [New York, 1976], 52). For a recent account of the importance of sexual desire in Malthus see Christopher Herbert, Culture and Anomic: Ethnographic Imagination in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago, 1991), 105–28.
29 There were, however, a few writers who expressed fears of a declining population well before "l'année terrible" of 1870. As early as 1842 the director of the Bureau de la statistique générale, Moreau de Jonnes, had written of the threat of rapid growth to the east in Prussia and Russia, warning of the " colossal populations which increase immensely by their own fertility and even more by war, incorporating in their ranks the subjugated peoples" (Jonnes, "Population de la France comparée à celle des autres États de l'Europe," Journal des Economistes 1 [1842]: 169). And in 1850, C. M. Raudot, a member of the legislative assembly of the Second Republic and a partisan of nonintervention in social and economic affairs, warned of population decline in a best-selling sensationalist attack on centralized state power and socialism (see Raudot, De la décadence de la France [Paris, 1850], 5, 155–60). Raudot claimed that the generally accepted figure for the French population at the end of the eighteenth century (around twenty-five million) was greatly underestimated, perhaps by as much as five million. Although he made much of the fact that this "error" in statistics had hidden a great decline in absolute numbers, he did not argue that this decline was due to declining birthrates. See discussions of Raudot in Spengler, France Face Dupopulation, 133, and Theodore Zeldin, France, 1848–1945: Anxiety and Hypocrisy (Oxford, 1981), 168.
31 Ibid., 76–78.
Malthus also asserted that the position of women in a given society provided a useful gauge for measuring the degree of civilization, but this was a common conceit of eighteenth-century social thought. In his treatment of the fact of reproduction itself, however, and its larger significance for measuring the success with which a given society managed to accommodate itself to its material circumstances, Malthus’s discussion remained relatively neutral on the question of gender. Continental authors such as Adolphe Quetelet, whose debt to Malthus was large, reflected this relative neutrality by measuring fertility in relation to marriage, or couples, rather than to specific groups of women or men in the population.

The technical innovation which marked the end of the Malthusian era in French population thinking also ended this posture of relative gender neutrality on the issue of fertility, and it was only with the rejection of Malthus that reproduction could be cast as a social obligation. However, French demographers, who had done so little to improve the measurement of births in their own country, were forced to wait until the issue was broached by a Scottish gynecological surgeon, J. Matthews Duncan, in 1868. Duncan’s *Fecundity, Fertility, Sterility, and Allied Topics,* and the series of papers he delivered to the Royal Society of Edinburgh between 1864 and 1867, established the standards for the measurement of fertility, soon to become widely accepted across Europe.

Taking advantage of the fact that a short-lived revision of the Scottish census procedure in 1855 had provided more information than usual, including the age of mothers at the moment of giving birth, Duncan proceeded to measure the “Actual Fertility” of the “Female Population as a whole at Different Ages.” In doing so, however, he made an important distinction between the concept of “fertility” and that of “fecundity.” This distinction explicitly connected the fertility index to a gendered vision of male and female responsibilities for reproduction.

In his 1868 work Duncan defined the distinction between “fertility” and “fecundity” in the following terms:

By fertility or productiveness I mean the amount of births as distinguished from the capability to bear. This quality of fertility is interesting chiefly to the statistician or the political economist. When a population is the subject of consideration it does not even involve the capability of every individual considered to bear, nor even the conditions necessary for conception. By fecundity I mean the demonstrated capability to bear children, it implies the conditions necessary for conception in the women of whom its variations are predicated. This quality of fecundity is interesting chiefly to the physician and the physiologist. In short, fertility implies fecundity, and also introduces the idea of number of progeny; while fecundity simply indicates quality without any superadded notion of quantity.

In other words, “fertility” measured the number of children produced by a particular population with no regard to the circumstances attendant to any individual birth. “Fecundity,” on the other hand, indicated the reproductive potential of individual women’s bodies.

Duncan’s distinction accomplished several important cognitive steps. First, his definition of “fertility” created the possibility of revealing the reproductive power of a given female population, without having to take into account the potentially confusing circumstances which surrounded any individual woman’s decision to bring a child to term. “Fertility” was a way of measuring the sum effect of these circumstances without having to pinpoint them exactly. Second, his definition of “fecundity” implied that only a particular subset of these potentially confusing circumstances were scientifically important: the physiological or biological conditions which allowed a woman to conceive. Duncan’s distinction effectively effaced the individual woman’s social and cultural context from the demographic equation by default on the one hand, in the definition of fertility, and by exclusion on the other, in the definition of fecundity. At the individual level Duncan perceived

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32 Ibid., 28.
33 Adolphe Quetelet, *Sur l’homme et le développement de ses facultés ou essai de physique sociale* (Paris, 1835), 1:58–72. The Duquâpiers pointed out that Malthus was interested in demographic factors such as the relation between the number of births and the duration of marriages, but they noted that he assumed that the “natural fertility” of women was the same everywhere (*Histoire de la démographie*, 365–66).
of reproduction as a biological problem. At the level of populations, fertility could be conceived of as the result of complex social and cultural factors, but his method of measurement effectively precluded a consideration of how this sociocultural matrix might be of significance to an individual woman's own reproductive life. Lacking such an opportunity to discuss why individual women might choose not to have children (for reasons other than involuntary sterility), Duncan's definition was only too easily reversed: fertility implied fecundity, but so too did fecundity imply a responsibility to be fertile.

Duncan's distinction caused some confusion initially, although it was eventually adopted in its barest outlines by most writers on the subject. Significantly, when French demographers adopted Duncan's terminology, they reversed the terms: fécondité was used to mean "fertility" and fertilité took the place of the English expression "fecundity." The instability between discussions of individual fecundity and collective fertility can be traced in one of the first French converts to Duncan's methods, Louis-Adolphe Bertillon. Bertillon was a pivotal figure in the development of demography in France. A doctor who published widely on population questions beginning in the 1850s, he later helped to organize the Service statistique de la ville de Paris in the 1870s and directed it until his death in 1883. In an article for the Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales, entitled "Natalité" (1876), Bertillon both introduced Duncan's method of calculating fertility according to the female population and effected a reversal of his own vestigial Malthusianism. This article, wholeheartedly natalist in both its tone and its conclusions, distinguished between "general natality," correspond-

38 Dupâquier and Dupâquier, Histoire de la démographie, 372-73. In an earlier work, Duncan himself had been rather unclear about this distinction: "By fertility or productiveness I mean the amount of births as distinguished from the capability to bear. This quality of fertility or productiveness is interesting chiefly to the statistician or the political economist. It does not involve the capability of every individual considered to bear, nor even the conditions necessary for conception. By fecundity I mean the capability to bear children; it is measured by the number born, and it implies the conditions necessary for conception in the women of whom its variations are predicated. This quality of fecundity is interesting chiefly to the physiologist and physician" (On the Variations of the Fertility and Fecundity of Women, 476.) Here Duncan somewhat confusedly asserts that both "fertility" and "fecundity" are quantitative measurements that apply to populations at large, while at the same time implying that "fertility" is an attribute of groups while "fecundity" is above all an attribute of individual women.

39 On the careers of Louis-Adolphe Bertillon, his father-in-law Achille Guillard, and his sons Jacques Bertillon and Alphonse Bertillon see Michel Dupâquier, "La Famille Bertillon et la naissance d'une nouvelle science sociale: La Démographie," Annales de démographie historique (1985): 293-311. Although Louis-Adolphe Bertillon was certainly the most important French social scientist to seize upon the question of women's fertility during this period, there were precedents. Edmond Desfossé, in a work primarily concerned with the question of infant mortality, had pointed out the low figures for marital fertility in 1860 (see Desfossé, Décroissance de la population en France—causes—remède [Paris, 1869], 15).

40 L.-A. Bertillon, "Natalité," Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales 11 (ser. 2, 1876): 446-47. Bertillon's terms were natalité générale, natalité spéciale, and fécondité effective des épouses. One should note that Bertillon did not cite Duncan's work, and it is probable that he was introduced to the Scottish doctor's classification system through the intermediary figure of William Farr, of the General Record Office in London. The moment of Bertillon's conversion can be dated quite precisely as occurring between 1874 and 1876. In his 1874 work, La Démographie figurée de la France, Bertillon insisted on emphasizing the dangers of high mortality, although he was certainly aware of declining fertility at this date. He wrote: "It is not by chance that I have chosen this subject [mortality]. Our fatherland is in need of workers and defenders; from all sides one hears complaints, not without reason, of our slow and feeble reproduction. But I think that before studying the conditions of increase... it is urgent to discover the causes of our devastation, and in a word, that it is better to conserve generations than to renew them" (La Démographie figurée de la France [Paris, 1874], 2).

41 L.-A. Bertillon, "Natalité," 444. This definition was often repeated by other writers on the subject, although not always with the same term of phrase resorted to by Bertillon in this example. See, for example, A. Lacassagne, "La Natalité à Lyon," Bulletin de la Société d'anthropologie de Lyon 6 (1887): 52-53; and A. Beaujon, "La Fécondité des mariages aux Pays-Bas et les causes de ses variations," Journal de la Société de statistique de Paris (1888): 207.
only women are apt to do so, the indication is to compare births to women alone.\textsuperscript{42}

Note first of all Bertillon’s reference to a frequentist or “objective” definition of probability, that is, one which holds these ratios to be real and empirically verifiable aspects of the natural world.\textsuperscript{43} Bertillon chose to model a population’s birthrate in terms of the frequency that a population with a given number of women produced a given number of children. In doing so, he effectively asserted that women’s bodies possessed objective properties which would lead to relative stability in the observed frequencies of births. Thus, his claim that “only women are apt to” produce a child became more than a simple statement about the fact that women bear children and men do not. It described a world in which the only measurably interesting fact about birth was the number of potential mothers.\textsuperscript{44}

Bertillon’s definition continued in the same vein, making his point ever clearer:

Meanwhile, there is cause to restrict even further the ratio in question; evidently it is not all women regardless of age who are apt to produce newborns; little girls and old women can hardly compete in this matter, only women of childbearing age \textit{[les femmes nubiles]}. Thus, only the latter category should be compared to the annual number of births, and this point is all the more important to the extent that the number of \textit{women} unable to reproduce is highly variable in each collectivity, and their distribution alters in many ways the strict ratio between births and those who contribute to it.

The key point in Bertillon’s argument was a slippage between two registers: the level of the individual woman and the “nubile” population. Finding it relatively easy to say that “only women are apt to” produce children on an individual basis, Bertillon assumed by analogy that an equally transparent causal link existed between the collective body of women and the expected number of annual births. This focus on the female population allowed Bertillon and his followers to set aside the entire panoply of social and cultural practices which impinge upon the production of children, not to mention the physiological characteristics of the men who were presumably participating in this activity. The strict internal logic of Bertillon’s argument should not detract from our understanding of how it resonated within the larger context of the fertility debate. The constitution of reproduction as a cause and effect relationship between \textit{les femmes nubiles} (aged 15–50) and birth could only be benign in an ideal world which allowed individuals who fit this category the free exercise of their reproductive capacity. Since late-nineteenth-century France was manifestly not such an ideal world, we must examine the consequences of such a definition of fertility, in both the scientific and political realms.\textsuperscript{45}

Bertillon claimed that the best indicator for measuring the process by which a society reproduced itself was the \textit{fécondité effective des épouses}, or marital fertility, and subsequent studies by him and other writers made marital fertility an important part of demographic study. He pointed out that “under the laws of our society, only married women have been granted the privilege, or the duty, of producing children.”\textsuperscript{46} Illegitimate births were relatively rare and therefore of little consequence in gauging a society’s reproductive strength. In later articles, he often cited figures which showed the great disparities among European nations in marital fertility, disparities which were often masked in comparisons of the crude birthrate. For example, noting that the natality of the Belgian population was only slightly higher than that of the French, Bertillon pointed out how great the difference between

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\item[43] As Ian Hacking has stated, “The fundamental distinction between \textit{objective} and \textit{subjective} in probability—so often put in terms of frequency vs. belief—is between modelling and inference” \textit{(The Taming of Chance} (Cambridge, 1990), 98). Hacking is referring to a shift in probabilistic thinking which occurred in the nineteenth century, in which chance (or indeterminacy) came to be thought of as a part of the natural world, rather than simply a sign of the limits of human understanding. A \textit{subjective} notion of probability would have led Bertillon to assert that our difficulty in ascertaining the number of births any population would produce was simply a product of our inability to piece together the minute causes which lead some couples to have more or less children and others none at all. With an \textit{objective} notion of probability, the limits of our knowledge have nothing to do with it: the frequency of births are seen to be a real and scientifically measurable ratio. See also Hacking, \textit{The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction, and Statistical Inference} (Cambridge, 1975).
\item[44] The power of this logic applied to the measurement of births is made clear in a further example put forth eleven years later by Bertillon’s son Jacques, also a prominent demographer and militant nationalist. In an 1887 article, which defined the proper procedure for measuring the number of illegitimate births, Jacques Bertillon asked: “Who produces an illegitimate birth? An unmarried woman. Thus, one must compare the number of illegitimate births to the number of unmarried women, and not to the total number of births. A legitimate birth can contribute nothing to an illegitimate birth; they are two facts absolutely independent of one another; and there is no more reason to compare them than there is to compare the number of illegitimate births to the number of marriages or the number of deaths” (\textit{Les Naissances illégitimes en France et dans quelques pays d’Europe}, extract from \textit{Travaux de la section de démographie du IVème Congrès international d’hygiène et de démographie} (Vienna, 1887), 1).
\item[45] It should be noted that some writers did mention the possibility of calculating the fertility index relative to other groups besides that of \textit{nubile women}. See, for example, the argument put forth by A. Beaunon, whose 1888 study of fertility in Holland opened with the assertion that “it would no doubt be more correct to compare legitimate births to the number of married couples, living together, who were of the age to reproduce.” Beaunon eventually rejected this as too difficult to measure and beyond the capabilities of any official census office (\textit{La Fécondité des mariages aux Pays-Bas}, 207).
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the two nations became when one compared the fertility of married
women. In fact, when he compared marital fertility for European coun-
tries he came up with the following figures: for every 1,000 married
women aged 15–50, 248 babies were born in England, 275 in Prus-
sia, and 279 in Belgium, but only 173 in France. "Thus, we who have
the most wives capable of having children, have the least, because our
wives [épouses] are the least fertile [fécondes]."47 Bertillon's use of
the term fécondes to speak of "our wives" provides a further example of
the powerful naturalizing tendency inherent in the vocabulary of demo-
graphic analysis. An individual woman's marital status had no necessary
connection to her biological capacity to bear children, nor did it make
sense to assume that the collective body of French wives were alone
to blame for the declining birthrate. But by speaking as if such terms
as fécondité were naturally applicable to the population of "our wives,"
Bertillon implied that reproductive capacity meant reproductive duty.
Or, in Duncan's terms, fecundity implied an obligation to be fertile.

The index of marital fertility thus focused an unprecedented
amount of attention on the place of women in society, serving to
assign responsibility for the decline even as it was numerically described.
This became a common technique of political writers on the subject of
depopulation. For example, Senator Edme Piot's La Question de la dé-
population en France discussed one by one the possible causes for the di-
minated rate of population growth in France—increase in emigration,
decrease in marriages, increase in deaths, and so on—and he con-
cluded that these were all insignificant factors. Finally, he arrived at
the figure of marital fertility, and as in Bertillon's example cited above,
Piot's language transformed the index into a cause of decline itself,
placing the blame squarely at the feet of French wives: "If French wives
had the fertility of German women, we would gain 500,000 children
per year."48

The fertility index, as Duncan, Bertillon, and subsequent writers
defined it, created a need for new kinds of information about the
women within the population: their number, their fecundity, their
marital status, their age, their age at the birth of their first child and
subsequent children, the number of children they had, and the age and

47 L.-A. Bertillon, "De la natalité française," Journal de la Société de statistique de Paris (1877):
200.
48 Edme Piot, La Question de la dépopulation en France: Le Mal—ses causes—ses remèdes (Paris,
1900), 14. Other writers who focused attention on marital fertility in this fashion include Paul
Leroy-Beaulieu, "La Question de la population en France," Journal de la Société de statistique de Paris
(1880): 118; Arène Dumont, Natalité et démocratie (Paris, 1898), 62ff. Marital fertility had become
a part of the Statistique générale's census in 1856, where it was given as the ratio of legitimate
births per 1 marriage (Statistique de la France, mouvement de la population en 1851, 1852 et 1853, xviii).

sex of their children. Significantly, this need for more specific kinds
of data became the occasion for extended meditations in the demo-
graphic literature concerning the ratio of women to men in society and
the proportion of children born of either sex. L.-A. Bertillon devoted
over a quarter of his article "Natalité" to these questions, revealing
a preoccupation with the lines of sexual differentiation as they were
drawn through the social order, a preoccupation quite evidently shared
by other writers on the subject.49

The primacy accorded to the question of sexual differentiation
within the population can be attributed, on the one hand, to what
critic Mary Poovey and historian Thomas Laqueur have recently
called the "incommensurability" of the sexes in nineteenth-century biolog-
ical thinking.50 In the context of the fertility debate, such definitions
of incommensurability served to delineate the separate spheres that
biology called upon men and women to occupy in the social order.
Given the historical tendency of scientific writers to think in these
terms, it is not surprising that when demographic data indicated regu-
lar differences in the number of males and females born, that such
data would be enlisted to further demonstrate the power of a biologi-
cally reinforced division of sexual roles in society. In turn, this linkage
between the question of sex ratios within the population to the mat-
ter of fertility and population decline is evidence of a concern on the
part of writers such as Bertillon with the possibility of fixing gender
differences in a scientific discourse that was profoundly structured by

49 In fact, statisticians had noted the constant excess of male births relative to female
births—a ratio of about 15/12—quite early. Philosopher of science Ian Hacking has recently
called it the first "statistical law," citing John Arbuthnot’s work of 1710, which claimed that
the constant ratio was evidence of Divine Providence (see Hacking, Taming of Chance, 21, 41).
Pierre Simon de Laplace mentioned the regularity in male and female births in his Essai philosophe sur
les probabilités of 1776. And in 1835 Adolphe Quetelet wrote about it at length, dismissing older
explanations such as that which held that colder climates favored males and warmer climates
females. Quetelet mentioned another theory, offered by Prevost, that the general preference for
male offspring caused people to stop having children once a male heir was produced, thus skew-
ing the ratio enough to account for the disparity. Nevertheless, Quetelet and his contemporary,
ygienist Michel Levy, concurred that the only measurably intervening factor in the determina-
tion of the sex of the newborn was the "relative age of the parents." See Adolphe Quetelet, Sur
Finally, one should note that the editors of the Statistique générale in its publication of 1856 took
care to point out the consistently larger number of males born in the first half of the nineteenth
century, claiming that the ratio was consistently close to 17/16 (see Statistique de la France, mouve-
ment de la population en 1851, 1852 et 1853, xxii).
50 Laqueur, Making Sex, 20–21, 149–92; Poovey, Uneven Developments, 6. In her discussion
of nineteenth-century Britain, Poovey described the function of this incommensurability in the
following terms: "The model of binary opposition between the sexes, which was socially realized
in separate but supposedly equal 'spheres', underwrote an entire system of institutional practices
and conventions at mid-century, ranging from a sexual division of labor to a sexual division of
economic and political rights" (Uneven Developments, 8–9).
contemporary social mores.53 Explanations for the preponderance of males in terms of the relative age of the parents or their relative constitutional vitality often reflected thinly disguised preconceptions of the ideal heterosexual coupling and perpetuated the familialist ideology which was so widespread in France during this period.

By the 1890s the demographic literature on fertility and depopulation had come to play a profound role in focusing public attention upon the female population in France. The technical advances of Duncan and Bertillon, combined with the rejection of Malthusian notions of political economy, created a new vocabulary for describing the social obligations of motherhood. The fertility index, a simple numerical ratio designed to allow for the comparison of birthrates among populations of different sizes and age structures, became the occasion for extended meditations on the proper relationship of women to their reproductive capacity and their respective duties toward the French nation. In Jules Simon's terms, the demographic literature set the stage for a debate which was to cast the majority of French women in the role of "bad wives," even as the "good mother" was extolled and praised.

The Politics of Fertility in Fin de Siècle France

Between the violent causes of devastation and Malthusianism there is one difference—the latter calamity, even as it slowly destroys the country, makes none of its inhabitants suffer. How true it is that the interests of individuals can be entirely opposed to those of the collectivity.

Jacques Bertillon, Le Problème de la dépopulation, 1897

The demographic definitions of fertility and fecundity were based upon a series of assumed connections between a woman's biological capacity to bear children and the nation's need for new members. In turn, natalist writers used the demographic literature to demonstrate that the decline in the French birthrate was caused by women who were placing their own economic and sexual pleasure before the needs of the country. This view gained wide acceptance in the years before World War I and crossed the wide ideological divides which separated republican politicians from Catholic moralists, socialists from liberals, progres- sives from conservatives. A small but vocal group of neo-Malthusian activists opposed this view. Believing that the emancipation of sexuality from reproduction would liberate the individual, and above all, the individual woman, from the constraints of an oppressive society, these militants sought to distribute information on contraception and sexual hygiene to the French population.52 The fertility debate thus became the latest chapter in an unresolved conflict at the heart of French political culture in the nineteenth century, a conflict which sought to define the respective obligations binding the individual to the national community. Within governing republican circles, this controversy was addressed in the 1890s by the new doctrine of solidarity, which allowed both republican natalists and moderate feminists to find common cause in supporting motherhood as a moral and social good.53 But whereas republican political theory had usually been content to treat "individuals" as neutral abstractions, the fertility debate revealed that some individuals, namely women, were more problematic than others.

To understand how the fertility debate resonated in a wider cultural context, one must juxtapose the natalists with their opponents: the neo-Malthusian supporters of birth control. The French birth-control movement was founded by Paul Robin, a lycée teacher who had become active in radical politics during the Second Empire. After his arrest in 1870 and subsequent exile, Robin had been nominated by Karl Marx himself to the executive committee of the International Working Men's Association. Because of quarrels with both Marx and Bakunin, however, Robin was expelled from the International in 1871. During his exile in London he met Charles and Alice Drysdale, the founders of the British Malthusian League, who convinced him of the necessity of incorporating a program for sexual emancipation into his political platform.54 He published his first important work, La Question sexuelle, in 1878 and soon after returned to France. The newly ascendant republican administration decided to overlook his political past, and he was appointed director of an orphanage at Cepsuis, probably because his secular beliefs accorded well with the anticlerical bent of the government. In the meantime, he quietly worked to distribute in-

52 The main methods of contraception in use in France were abstinence, withdrawal, and various mechanical devices such as condoms, sponges, pesaries, often supplemented by douching. Condoms were expensive and not readily available until the mass production of rubber in the late nineteenth century. See Angus McLaren, Sexuality and Social Order, 12, 18–25. See also Jean-Pierre Bardet and Jacques Dupâquier, "Contraception: Les Français les premiers, mais pourquoi?" Communications 44 (1986): 3–33.
first woman psychiatric intern in a Paris hospital. Pelletier explicitly referred to the importance of gender in understanding the progress of the human species. "Motherhood," she wrote, "is a heavy charge for a woman, and it is above all to her that the dilemma of the species and the individual presents itself."57 Furthermore, she claimed, the evolution of the collective had always weighed more heavily upon individual women than on men.

As one ascends the animal hierarchy, one sees the individual increase in value at the expense of the species, which declines accordingly. ... This same antagonism can be found within [the history of] humanity. Among savage and barbarian peoples, individual lives are short and reproduction is intense. Women become fertile at very young ages, and are constantly pregnant or nursing infants, often one after the other. At thirty, they are already old.58

Given this history of biological suffering, Pelletier asserted that the decline in fertility could not be regarded as a sign of national degeneration. On the contrary, depopulation was "an essential good, a corollary of the general evolution of humanity [des êtres], it [was] the expression of the victory of the individual over the species."59

Other supporters of Robin's movement made similar evolutionist arguments, although the focus on gender distinctions was not always as explicit as in Pelletier's work. Alfred Naquet, the former senator and neo-Malthusian publicist, asked, "Has not Darwinian law, by elevating ... the intellectual and moral level of humanity, given us the means to find ... in hygiene, well-being, and increased morality the elements of our own future perfection? Or are we, like plants or animals, condemned to an organic fatalism?"60 Even Maria Deraimes, a leader of the moderate feminist Société pour l'amélioration du sort de la femme et la reivindication de ses droits, wrote that progress in the social sciences—"the science of human relations in their collectivity"—would allow the French to transcend their current crisis:

This science is based on the profound understanding of man and the correlation which exists between his anatomical constitution [and] the milieu in which he is formed. ... It is here and not elsewhere that one must search for the determining factors of his behavior. Thus, one is led to the knowledge that it is possible to exercise a salutary action on the physical and moral attributes of

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57 Michelle Perrot has summarized the importance of this aspect of neo-Malthusian thought: "Science and hygiene replace God and morality, and birth control is supported both as a movement for the liberation of the individual and as a lever for social revolution. Neo-Malthusianism is opposed to traditional morality and subversive of the existing social order by giving the disinterested masses the supreme weapon, control over their reproduction" (Malthusianism and Socialism, 265).

58 Ibid., 63.

59 Ibid., 61.

60 Alfred Naquet, Temps futurs: Socialisme—anarchie (Paris, 1900), 197.
the individual during the period of his formation. Do not doubt it, we are living the last moments of the current civilization, we are at the end of a social era [une forme social].

Despite the curiously masculine language of Deraismes's statement, her message is clear: the problematic individual in French society was feminine, and it was a woman's biology that would be transcended in the new social order. This became the central tenet of neo-Malthusian thinking, made most explicit in Madeleine Pelletier's words: "It is obvious that women are not anatomically identical to men, but that is the individual's concern and has nothing to do with society."

By appropriating this vocabulary, the neo-Malthusians and their feminist allies made the language of the population sciences available to alternative political visions. Most importantly, their discussion of fertility refused to recognize the slippage between the circumstances of an individual woman's decision to bear children and the collective "responsibility" of the "nubile population" to provide the nation with a new generation of workers and soldiers. This move made them doubly subversive in the eyes of the authorities, however, and figures such as Robin and Pelletier became objects of police surveillance. A 1907 police report on the Ligue de régénération humaine emphasized only their connection to the militant left and claimed that the hidden goal of Robin's organization was to profit from the sale of contraceptives so that the proceeds could be used to further their revolutionary aims. The police's assumption that the neo-Malthusians were acting out of self-interest reflected a larger conservative tendency to see the movement as a symptom of an excessive individualism that had been taken hold in France at the expense of a properly self-effacing commitment to the nation.

The emergence of the neo-Malthusians took place against the backdrop of an enormous escalation of interest in the problem of declining fertility. Until the 1890s, the study of "depopulation" had remained primarily the provenance of doctors, demographers, and economists. This situation changed, however, when the census revealed that in 1890, 1891, 1892, and 1895 there had actually been an excess of deaths over births. The result of these figures was a new sense of urgency among the members of the scientific and political establishment. Most notably, Jacques Bertillon, the son of Louis-Adolphe Bertillon and a prominent demographer and nationalist in his own right, founded the Alliance nationale pour l'accroissement de la population française in 1896. The goal of this organization was to lobby in parliament for policies that would encourage families to have more children and to act as a forum for the discussion of legislative remedies to the declining birthrate. On 25 February 1897, the newspaper L'Eclair published a debate between Robin and Bertillon, making their respective organizations known to a wide public. In 1902, at the urging of Bertillon's Alliance, Interior Minister Waldeck-Rousseau convened an extraparliamentary commission to discuss the problem of depopulation. The list of the commission's members contained many of the most respected demographers and statisticians living in France at the time, including Emile Levassor, author of the monumental study La Population française (1889), Lucien March, the director of the Statistique générale, and Arsène Dumont, an idiosyncratic social theorist and demographer whose theory of "social capillarity" had a profound influence on Zola's Fécondité. Other members of the parliamentary commission

66 Jacques Bertillon's works on declining fertility included: Le Problème de la dépopulation, cited above; Des Causes de l'abaissement de la natalité en France et des remèdes à y apporter, extract from La Revue internationale de sociologie (Paris, 1910); and, most important, La Désopulation de la France—ses conséquences—ses causes—mesures à prendre pour la combattre (Paris, 1911).
67 McLaren, Sexuality and Social Order, 177–78. The stated goal of the Alliance nationale was "to attract the attention of all to the danger which depopulation brings to the French nation, and to demand measures, fiscal or other, which would increase the birthrate" (Alliance nationale pour l'accroissement de la population française, Programme, statuts, et compte-rendu des travaux [Paris, 1897], 3). The Alliance published a monthly bulletin containing a summary of their efforts, including articles on depopulation and commentaries on the debates in the Assembly that dealt with the measures they proposed. Among the many issues they pursued, aside from statistical reminders of the declining fertility, were aid to pregnant women, assistance for children of working women, prizes to be awarded the parents of families numeroses, and privileges for such families, including special consideration from schools, reductions of military service, and tax breaks. They also discussed the feasibility of a tax on bachelorhood and reforms of the laws of succession. Although predominantly secular in tone, they also published the work of Catholic writers, such as George Fonsignore's article "Un péris national," which claimed that the simple adherence to the Christian faith would bring about an increased birthrate. See Bulletin de l'Alliance nationale pour l'accroissement de la population française (15 July 1901): 267–72.
included the economists Yves Guyot and Charles Gide, Léon Mirman of the Office of Assistance and Public Hygiene, and Arthur Fontaine, the author of many reports on population for the National Assembly.68 Historian Alain Becchia’s description of the Commission’s composition could be applied to the fertility debate itself: “[It was born] under the triple sign of politics, the bureaucracy, and science.”69

This apparent sense of purpose on the part of the political and scientific establishment did not translate into a uniform consensus on the causes of declining fertility, and there was much disagreement as to the remedies available to the state. Moreover, despite a flurry of parliamentary debate devoted to the reform of military conscription (to grant fathers exemptions), maternity leaves, assistance to familles nombreuses, and encouragements within the bureaucracy to allow fathers with more than three children avenues to quicker promotions, remarkably little was passed into law.70 To be sure, many pieces of protective legislation that focused upon the family had been passed in the 1870s and 1880s.71 Nevertheless, the fact remains that the increased discussion of depopulation did not in itself lead to the passage of any significant legislation aimed specifically at stimulating the birthrate until the eve of the war.72

The failure of the nationalists to see their proposals enacted into law should not lead us to assume that the issue had not achieved its full political significance during the two decades prior to the war. The amount of ink spilled and the vitriolic nature of the debate attest to its importance. If anything, the paralysis of the assembly in the face of a crisis many of its members believed to be an imminent threat to the nation’s future suggests that the significance of the debate lay outside of the world of practical politics and instead involved a crisis of larger proportions permeating the culture as a whole. The discussion of depopulation in the French parliament was only one arena among

many in which the relationship between a woman’s reproductive capacity and the nation were examined and discussed; only an extremely narrow definition of political significance could justify minimizing the importance of this debate.

The extremely wide range of theories invoked to explain the causes of declining fertility in the decades before World War I attests to the scope of the cultural crisis. One current of thought sought to attribute the decline in births to physiological or evolutionary causes, claiming, as did Gaëtan Delaunay, that “inferior species are more fertile than the superior [species], and fertility diminishes as one moves upward through the steps of evolution.”73 Likewise, Dr. Éric Maurel, in his work De la dépopulation de la France, attributed the diminished growth to the spread of what he termed l’hérédito-arthritisme, a hereditary deficiency which led to an excess of female children, birth defects, and infertility.74 As the economic historian Joseph Spengler has noted, however, the vast majority of writers rejected the search for physiological causes, supporting instead various arguments which found fault with French society and with the cultural practices which surrounded reproduction.75 Among the members of Waldeck-Rousseau’s extra-parliamentary commission, arguments which sought to enumerate the social and cultural causes of depopulation carried considerable weight, presumably because legislative intervention would have been considered futile against the forces of nature.76

Above all, the writers who sought to trace the social causes of depopulation focused on volitional causes. This type of explanation accorded well with the assumption that it was individual selfishness which was to blame for the decline in the birthrate. An 1897 article in the newspaper L’Eclair asked, “What will become of France if one abandons

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68 Becchia, “Milleux parlementaires,” 202–5. For a complete list of the commission’s members see Becchia’s Annexe 2, ibid., 245–45.
69 Ibid., 202.
70 See Becchia’s useful summary of the various proposals put forth in the assembly during these years, “Milleux parlementaires,” 223–30; see also Mary Lynn Stewart’s account of the delay in France in enacting maternity leaves for pregnant women in Women, Work, and the French State, 169–90. A law mandating maternity leaves was not enacted in France until 1915, despite great success in linking the issue to repopulation.
72 After the trauma of World War I, however, the nationalist rhetoric reached a fever pitch. For a discussion of this see especially Mary Louise Roberts, Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927 (Chicago, 1994), esp. chap. 4 on the law of July 1920, which aimed at eliminating the dissemination of information about contraception and abortion.
73 Gaëtan Delaunay, “La Fécondité,” La Revue scientifique 25 (3 Oct. 1885), 434. An associate of Delaunay’s, Dr. Paul Jacoby, developed this idea by comparing the relative fertility of French departments in accordance with his gauges of civilization: population density and the number of “important people” (personnages remarquables) who originated in them (see Jacoby, Études sur la sélection chez l’homme (Paris, 1904), 355–39).
74 Maurel, De la dépopulation de la France, 60–68, 85–98. Reflecting the influence of Lamarckian notions of acquired characteristics in France, Maurel attributed the spread of this hereditary condition to a French propensity to overeat. For a discussion of the influence of Lamarckian heredity for French population thinking see William Schneider, Quality and Quantity: The Quest for Biological Regeneration in Twentieth-Century France (Cambridge, 1990), 5–9, 70–73, 87–88, passim.
75 Spengler, France Face’s Dépopulation, 158. Spengler gives a useful summary of the explanations given for declining fertility, dividing them into three categories: (1) various descriptions of involuntary sterility, (2) those whose Malhuisian influence led them to blame an inability of the French economy to support an increasing population, and (3) those which ascribed the decline to volitional causes with social or cultural origins. Spengler noted that the first category had few supported some combination of the latter two.
76 Becchia, “Milleux parlementaires,” 222.
the birthrate to individual egoism?" 77 The sociologist Frédéric Le Play and his followers at the journal La Réforme sociale blamed French inheritance laws and the degradation of paternal authority in the French legal code. 78 Jacques Bertillon cited "the ambition of the father for his child" as the primary cause of declining fertility. 79 Emile Cheysson, the engineer and social economist, faulted French women for their excessive "egoism" and their "fear of being discomfited" by the "pains of motherhood [and] the cares of education." 80 A conservative Catholic author, D. M. Couturier, wrote that "depopulation is the most infamous death of a nation because it is a desired and premeditated suicide. . . . It is egoism substituting for divine will." 81 At the opposite end of the political spectrum, the socialist Robert Hertz incorporated these arguments into his own critique of the bourgeois family, "sterilized" by its preoccupation with material goods. 82 Finally, the liberal economist Paul Leroy-Beaulieu blamed the civilizing process of modernity itself, within which he included "the development of education, personal and familial ambition, democratic ideas, competition in diverse professions, the taste for luxury, of an easier life [de sans-gêne], an excess of saving [prévoyance]." 83 Of course, the remedies proposed by these writers differed according to their various political persuasions. The Catholics desired the reestablishment of their religion and an end to the anticlerical policies of the Republic; Le Play attacked the meddling interference of the state in the patriarchal family; while Bertillon, Cheysson, and Hertz called for the national implementation of social assistance programs to lift the burden of child rearing from the working classes. Nevertheless, their emphasis on the excesses of individualism in French society had a common target: the growing movement in France to establish the grounds for the equal participation of women in public life.

The nativist attack on individualism did not necessarily lead to an explicit confrontation with feminists such as Pelletier, but gender often worked its way into nativist arguments in a heavily coded fashion. Arsène Dumont, whose curious blend of socialist politics and positivist science made him one of the most interesting nativist writers, even appeared to agree with Pelletier on the necessity of distinguising between biological functions of the individual and social obligations to the collective. Dumont criticized Malthus for having pictured men and women as beings who were entirely motivated by desire. "Man has the generative instinct in common with animals," argued Dumont, "but when he accumulates possessions [épargne] and labors, this instinct leads to other results that are different from what animals accomplish with their fertility." 84 Like Pelletier, then, Dumont held that biology was not necessarily destiny, and he pointed to the fertility decline as the primary evidence that humans were capable of transcending the dictates of their nature.

Unlike Pelletier, however, Dumont could not accept the fertility decline as a positive good. Instead, he developed the critique of modernity found in the work of Beaulieu and others into an all-embracing theory of "social capillarity." Dumont attributed the declining birthrate to a widespread selfish desire for social advancement that made people "regard their children as rivals for their own happiness." 85 He described the action of social capillarity in his influential work Dépopulation et civilisation, published in 1890:

All men tend to rise from the inferiors levels of society to those which are immediately above. This tendency may be blocked by material obstacles . . . which immobilize him in his position, but the tendency itself is incontestable. Guided by an infallible and fatal instinct, each social molecule throws itself with all the energy available . . . into the task of unceasingly rising towards a luminous ideal which seduces and attracts it, as oil rises in the wick of a lamp. The more [this ideal] is ardent and brilliant, the more active and devouring is this action of social capillarity. 86

This powerful image of the seductive attractions of material and social advancement allowed Dumont to state his "new population principle": the birthrate exists in inverse proportion to the magnetic appeal of individual social improvement. Dumont found "social capillarity" to be most powerful in a liberal democracy such as France, because the establishment of equality in theory but not in fact acted as a continual stimulation to personal ambition. A socialist society, on the other hand, by establishing real equality "would destroy social capillarity, and bring about an infinite multiplication of births." 87 Unfortunately for Dumont's own career prospects, his socialist convictions prevented his

77 Eclair, 29 Jan. 1897, 1.
78 See the discussion of Le Play in Zeldin, France, 1848-1945, 189-90.
79 Jacques Bertillon, Problème de la dépopulation, 23.
80 Emile Cheysson, "l'Affaissement de la natalité française."
81 D. M. Couturier, Démarches: La Dépopulation de la France, crain tes et espérances (Paris, 1901), x.
82 Hertz, Socialisme et dépopulation, 25.
83 Leroy-Beaulieu, Question de la population, 220. For similar arguments see Charles Raison, La Dépopulation de la France et le Code Civil (Bourg-en Bresse, 1900), 177; and Turquan, "Contribution à l'étude sur la dépopulation de la France," 8.
84 Arsène Dumont, Dépopulation et civilisation (Paris, 1890), 41.
85 Ibid., 106.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., 127.
ideas from being wholeheartedly adopted by the natalist mainstream, and he committed suicide after being denied a professorship at the School of Anthropology.88

Nevertheless, Dumont's critique of excessive individualism found a wide audience among later writers, and it is in their work that one can find anxious evocations of the role played by women in stimulating a wasteful and debilitating attention to the goal of personal advancement and satisfaction. Georges Deherme defined the decadence of fin de siècle French bourgeois society in the following terms, citing Dumont in the same discussion:

Our overheated and incoherent life is unhealthy and absurd. The social scene [le monde], the visits, the receptions, the representations, the excessive luxury, the sumptuous feminine toilettes, the endless search for "relations": to marry young daughters and find connections for young men. These are the imbecile, vulgar crimes of a degenerated class, which is incapable of understanding the obligations of its rank. . . . The woman who wears a hat costing thirty louis and who surrounds her neck with jewelry costing 100,000 francs is a monster who is all the more dangerous because all women envy her and attempt to imitate her.89

Deherme's careful selection of examples made his message all the more clear: women were particularly susceptible to the egoism which was the ruin of bourgeois society. Women were more likely to be corrupted by the decadent examples of others, and they were more likely to be seduced by a taste for luxury. They were responsible for the ruin of their families, and by extension, the nation.90

The anxiety about excessive female individualism, so explicit in the work of Deherme, can also be detected among other natalist writers, although in somewhat more coded language. D. M. Couturier, a Catholic moralist, wrote:

The enemy is not outside, it is in our walls, seated at the hearth of our fatherland. It is installed in the cottages of the poor, in the lodgings of workers, and in the mansions and castles of the rich and

powerful. It is everywhere, and everywhere it brings with it a voluntary death, the extinction of the race and the ruin of the nation, each hour tearing another piece of flesh from France. . . . The enemy is the voluntary sterility of the French race.91

Nowhere in his description of the "enemy" did Couturier actually mention women in particular, but his evocative choice of imagery, which called to mind the intensely private and gendered interior space of the family, left no doubt as to whose decisions were most to blame for this "voluntary sterility." Who else "sat at the hearth" but the wife and mother? Who else was "sterile" but French wives? Couturier's language, which cannot be seen as accidental, revealed the contours of a powerful consensus: the problematic individual in French society was female.

The idea that feminist claims for the right to control fertility constituted a misinterpretation of the liberal ideals of equality and individualism found a wide public in fin de siècle France. Anna Lampière, an advocate of women's education, published a series of articles in the newspaper Le Temps in the 1890s, claiming that feminism "offered to a superficial liberalism the advantage of being an application of the 'principles of 89,' a manifestation of that individualism which is ignorant of all solidarity."92 Lampière called for the "rational use of feminine activities," in accordance with "biosocial and sociological laws," such that the "harmonious organization of individual life and social life" might be preserved.93 Leroy-Beaulieu made a similar argument, warning that legislators concerned with allowing women to earn their own living should beware the "assimilation of women into men, and avoid the suppression of all legal manifestations of the natural functions of the sexes."94 He added that one must not hide the fact that "the feminist movement" constitutes . . . a serious peril for civilization. By rendering the household less desirable and making motherhood more feared and incommodious, the masculinization of woman must gradually affect the birthrate, which has already shown only too great a tendency to weaken in the majority of civilized countries.95

88 McLaren, Sexualité and Social Order, 173.
89 Deherme, Classes moyennes, 302; citation of Dumont, ibid., 300.
90 Deherme's focus on the dangers of female individualism was a continual theme in his work, and he argued for a strict imposition of separate spheres for men and women in the social order: "Is woman inferior to man? Not at all. Woman cannot be separated from man. The individual is only an abstraction. There is the family, the fatherland, and humanity. These are the real beings [étres réels]. They are each composed of men and women, . . . and each attains his or her greatest social utility and value in perfecting themselves as such. Above all the woman. Agitation, instability, deviation, changes in social class, and bovairism [sic] are more harmful for women than men" (Classes moyennes, 188–93).
91 D. M. Couturier, Demain: La Dépopulation de la France, 2–3, 7.
92 Anna Lampière, Le Rôle social de la femme (Paris, 1898), 3. This work is a collection of the articles published in Le Temps.
93 Ibid., 2–3. Dumont, too, claimed that "the toxic principle [is] this individualism, the insufficient sense of solidarity" (Notabilité et démocratie, 165).
94 Leroy-Beaulieu, Question de la population, 273.
95 Ibid. Leroy-Beaulieu concluded by asserting that "a population which remains stationary finishes by languishing, becoming effeminate; and in small families, with only two or three offspring, the children are raised with an overly patulous tenderloin, they are surrounded with a softening affection which diminishes their strength of character and mind" (ibid., 291).
The curious slippage that occurs in Leroy-Beaulieu's argument between the supposed immutability of biological definitions of gender and the capacity of social behavior to threaten this only apparent immutability captures the tension and anxiety that pervaded the work of social scientists in this period. Leroy-Beaulieu remained trapped in a double bind of his own creation, between the desire to invoke a natural law that could dictate the separate spheres of men and women in society and the necessity of finding a human law that could protect the natural order threatened by modern civilization.96

Caught at opposite ends of the same irreconcilable divisions—between the biological and the social, on the one hand, and the individual and the collective, on the other—the natalists and the neo-Malthusians continued to talk past one another. The natalist critique of French society was primarily an autocrisitique of the bourgeoisie, performed on itself by its own self-appointed political and scientific guardians. The neo-Malthusian position on fertility, on the other hand, had a very different audience. They aimed not at the middle classes, who were already limiting their births to a large degree, but at the working populations of French cities. In this sense, the fertility debate was not a debate at all, in the dialogic sense of the term. Rather, it was a confrontation between ideological opponents whose respective vocabularies were embedded in a contradictory set of schematic relationships between nature and society, individual and nation.

In the Malthusian paradigm, which held sway throughout much of the century, sexuality was to the individual as reproduction was to society. In each case the first term provided the motivating energy which drove the second. Neither term nor case was given priority over the other, and the equation was imbued with fatalist implications because of the assumption that the sexual motor would necessarily drive the social body beyond its capacity to support itself. The natalist assumption, on the other hand, that sexuality was to reproduction as the individual was to society, lent priority to the second term in each case, transforming both sexuality and the individual into functional vehicles for the realization of a society that was congruent with the physiological demands of nature. The neo-Malthusians, in an optimistic corollary of the Malthusian assumption and a reversal of the natalist belief, held that the emancipation of sexuality from reproduction would produce the emancipation of the individual from the constraints of an oppressive society. The play of gender in these formulations followed their implicit values. Just as demography made its measure of fertility the population of "nubile" women, so too did natalist propaganda make its measure of national health the extent to which this population was protected and inscribed with the role of motherhood. The neo-Malthusian feminists, on the other hand, attempted to dismantle the social significance of a woman's biological functions, asserting the necessary right of a woman to control her reproductive life.

**Conclusion**

Despite the tremendous amount of attention paid to depopulation between 1871 and 1914, no substantial changes in social policy were made until after World War I. During the first half of the Third Republic the natalist lobby was unable to muster enough support in the Assembly to pass any legislation providing incentives for larger families in France. But this failure should not be taken as a sign that the issue had not reached its full significance in these years; on the contrary, the depopulation debate served an important ideological function: the attention paid to reproduction provided moralists and reformers with a vehicle for announcing the special obligations which biology entailed for women in French society. Although nationalist fears of a more populous Germany certainly added to the sense of urgency felt by the French in confronting their own restricted birthrate, "depopulation" remained inextricably linked to an attempt by legislators and social scientists to define the social and political boundaries of women's participation both in the private realm and in public life.

The demographic literature which brought the issue of a declining birthrate to national attention in the 1870s and 1880s contributed a great deal to this focus upon the female population. The technical innovations which lay behind the definitions of fertilité and fécondité reinforced a general tendency to see the problem in terms of an abdication of motherhood by French women for the sake of individual fulfillment and gave this view the full weight of empirical science. Just as Zola's Dr. Boutan was able to move effortlessly from an individual woman's decision to use contraception to an apocalyptic vision of nature's revenge upon the human species, so too did the demo-

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96 Other writers found themselves caught in the same dilemma, forced to invoke the external power of social institutions to meet the threat to the family brought about by the emancipation of women. Delherme, for example, wrote, "The state can only substitute for the family to the extent that it disassociates it, and it is above all through the progress of feminism that this is accomplished" (Classes moyennes, 196.) The socialist Dumont came to the same conclusion, finding the only cure for excessive individualism in the subordination of the individual to the state: "The individual . . . takes himself as the goal, and considers himself to be the primary purpose [à cause même] of the State and the race. In reality, he must be subordinated to the State, as the State itself must be subordinated to the goal that reason assigns to it in each circumstance" (Dépopulation et civilisation, 380).
graphic literature lay the blame for national decline squarely at the feet of France’s excessively “egotistical” wives.

Paradoxically, however, identifying motherhood as the natural destination of all women could only increase the level of anxiety which the French felt in the face of declining fertility. The birth statistics, interpreted in this light, could only reveal a “natural” state which did not take care of itself. And if “nature” was not self-regulating, how useful was the concept as the foundation of social policy? The inability of nativist politicians and demographers to address this contradiction at the heart of their enterprise attests to the power of their preconceptions and points to a persistent blindness at the center of late-nineteenth-century French population research.

That the neo-Malthusians were able to appropriate the language of biological regeneration in the service of their own quite different political agenda, however, indicates that the language used to describe these obligations was not inescapably linked to official measures to restrain the reproductive freedom of individual women and men. The neo-Malthusians’ critical and rhetorical engagement with the discourse of the population sciences had implications far beyond their actual material accomplishments as propagandists and supporters of family planning, because it set up the possibility of a feminist politics which did not retreat into an essentializing vision of gender roles. Rather, it sought to dismantle the connection between social behavior and sex, making it a matter of individual choice, rather than biological necessity.

Regulating Abortion and Birth Control: Gender, Medicine, and Republican Politics in France, 1870–1920

Jean Elisabeth Pedersen

From 1873–75, the members of the Société d’anthropologie de Paris participated in the first of many anxious discussions of the declining French birthrate. Following a call to action by Louis-Adolphe Bertillon, statistician for the city of Paris, a major presentation by Dr. Gustave Lagneau, and lengthy debate, the members agreed that the problem was the result of “the very natural preoccupation of a father to assure the future of his children.”¹ When one listener, the economist Sanson, argued that the topic was more appropriate for economists than for anthropologists, Lagneau responded that discussing depopulation was “perfectly within the jurisdiction of the Société d’anthropologie [and belonged] to our society more than any other.”²

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