

"An Answer to Mr. Roosevelt" by Margaret Sanger

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(In the October issue of the *Metropolitan Magazine* appeared an article by former-President Roosevelt, entitled "Birth Control--From the Positive Side." It revealed a desire to arrive at the same results of race betterment which we advocate. It swept aside, however, not only the principle of voluntary motherhood, but the existing racial and class conditions which must be taken into consideration if the desired end is to be attained. The following is Margaret Sanger's reply, which appears in the December number of the *Metropolitan*. --Ed.)

The trouble with nearly all writers who oppose birth control is that they consider only proximate instead of ultimate effects. They want large numbers of high quality citizens. Therefore, they contend, let the existing high quality citizens have more children. They assume that families now living in comfortable circumstances will be able to maintain their standards, no matter how many additional children are born. In other words, they expect quality to take care of itself.

We advocates of birth control know that one cannot make quality by insisting on quantity. One cannot make better people simply by having more people.

Mr. Roosevelt says that in order to make a man into a better citizen, we must first have the man. The right environment in which to receive and develop the man is of greater importance. Society, as at present constituted, does not provide the means of rearing unrestricted hordes of human beings into intelligent citizenship. Therefore, birth control has become necessary as a check upon the blind working of ignorance and poverty.

When considering the problems of the class known as the "submerged tenth," even the most conservative are willing to admit its need of birth control. But it is an error to suppose that the proportion of families sunk in destitution constitutes only one-tenth of the population. Figures are available to prove that it is closer to three-tenths, or well over one quarter. The census of 1910 shows that 10.7 per cent of married women in the United States went to work outside their homes to help keep their families together. There, without looking farther, is a submerged tenth among women alone. There is little doubt that the proportion of wage-earning mothers has greatly increased since 1910, and it is equally beyond question that an enormous number of poverty-stricken women are prevented by their excessive family burdens from seeking to earn money outside the home.

They who ban the open and legal dissemination of birth control practically say--Let the slums spawn if they must; the prime aim is to goad the upper classes into greater fertility.

Both effects are deplorable. There is no greater national waste than the spawning of the slums, with its resultant high maternal and infant mortality rates, child labor and prostitution. As for increasing the fertility of the upper classes, it is certain that the majority of such parents even now have as many children as any rational eugenist could ask them to do, were he in possession of all the facts of each case--health, income, educational needs and provision for the future, etc. Admitting that they give birth to fewer children, the fact is that they bring, relatively, to maturity almost as many as the poor succeed in doing. The following figures prepared by the French authority, Dr. J. Bertillon, demonstrate this point.

For the whole of France 86.6 per cent of the children of rich parents reach twenty years of age, and only 48.6 per cent of the children of poor parents. The figures for Paris give a fertility rate of about 100 births per 1,000 poor mothers, and of about 50 per 1,000 rich mothers. Combining these with the former figures, it appears that for each 1,000 rich mothers there would be 43.3 children

surviving to twenty years annually, and for each 1,000 poor mothers only 48.6 children. In France, as elsewhere, the poor mother is handicapped in rearing her surviving offspring. This results in a percentage of unfitness, and the contribution of the high birth rate classes to the adult effective population is consequently no higher proportionately than that of the low birth rate classes.

The world over, the intelligent parents of three children or less have been, and are, the upholders of national standards. This is particularly true of America.

By regarding the bringing of a child into the world as a great social responsibility, the modern American woman shows a fine sense of morality. Since the State does not compel marriage, but leaves it to individual choice, she does not see why motherhood, which is a much more serious problem, should be enforced.

The American woman of today is physically and nervously unable to compete with her grandmother in the matter of bearing unlimited offspring. In Colonial times, the environment was favorable and women specialized on reproduction with eminent success. The prospective mothers of this generation are compelled to divide their creative energies between child bearing and social and economic complexities. It has been estimated that last year seven and a half million women were engaged in industry in the United States, the majority of them in nerve-racking trades. Ten hours a day at a sewing machine or a telephone switchboard are not conducive to either a physical or mental receptiveness to maternity.

It is a very common fallacy that the decadence of Greece and Rome was due to the artificial limitation of offspring. It is surprising to find a historian like Mr. Roosevelt repeating the error. During the periods he refers to, birth control was, indeed, practised, and as a result some of the greatest poets, thinkers and geniuses, generally, of that, or any other age, were developed. Birth control was one of the few serious moral forces at work tending to preserve the integrity of the State. But, in Rome especially, it was not quite effective enough to combat the soft luxury and vice which had come as an aftermath of an orgy of conquest.

The falling birth rate of college graduates, as demonstrated by the statistics gathered in Harvard and Yale by John C. Phillips, should not be considered alarming. The best thing that the modern American college does for young men or young women is to make of them highly sensitized individuals, keenly aware of their responsibility to society. They quickly perceive that they have other duties toward the State than procreation of the kind blindly practised by the immigrant from Europe. They cannot be deluded into thinking quantity superior to quality. But they can be trusted not to suffer extinction. The operation of natural law will prevent the ratio of reproduction from remorselessly falling to zero. In this, as in all other population phenomena, a new level of fertility is being sought--that is all.

In many other isolated groups, the same process can be observed today. The editor of "The Journal of Heredity" has found that out of 1,512 families of Methodist ministers in America, the average number of children is now only 3.12. The birth rate in the English Society of Friends has fallen from 20 per 1,000 in 1876 to less than 8 per 1,000 in 1915. Or, to take an illustration from an entire racial group, statistics show that the size of Jewish families in Europe has been rapidly decreasing since 1876. They contain now only two to four children, with a growing tendency to restrict the number to two, whilst only twenty years ago they had four to six.

But it is well to emphasize that we advocates of birth control are not so much disturbed by the stationary birth rate of the thinking classes, as by the reckless propagation of the ignorant. We consider that the falling birth rate is a worldwide movement of civilization.

Mr. Roosevelt quotes approvingly the statement of a French newspaper that the present war was

really due to the increasing birth rate of Germany and the falling birth rate of France. Had Germany had to face 60,000,000 Frenchmen, instead of 39,000,000, this authority holds, the war would not have taken place. In my opinion, two overpopulated nations would have fought even more readily and long before. The war was due to the over-population of Germany and Russia, not to France's stationary population. But once put to the ordeal, the French soldiers, sturdy and highly individualistic because they came from small families, proved at the Battle of the Marne and Verdun the efficacy of birth control, by defeating an enemy mechanically much more formidable than themselves.

On the other hand, the same Germany who had failed against France easily routed the hordes of Russian soldiers, who owed their numbers to an unlimited system of reckless propagation. Germany's birth rate is falling.

In 1860 it was 37.9 per thousand inhabitants and in 1912 only 29.1. It is common knowledge that the economists of Europe do not hope for universal peace until the birth rate of Russia also begins to decline.

The intelligent class, with its acceptance of birth control, holds the same position in American society that France does among the nations of the world.

It is an error to suppose that woman avoids motherhood because she is afraid to die. Rather does she fear to live. She fears a life of poverty and drudgery, weighed down by the horror of unwanted pregnancy and tortured by the inability to rear decently the children she has alreadybrought into the world.