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WOMEN AND THE BIOLOGICAL REPRODUCTION OF "THE NATION"

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Synopsis — This article examines the ways women affect and are affected by national and ethnic processes in relation to women's role as biological reproducers of the nation. In particular, the article examines three hegemonic discourses in relation to national reproduction — the "people as power" discourse, the eugenist discourse, and the Malthusian discourse — and the ways they construct women. In its conclusion, the article starts to draw some connections between women's roles as biological reproducers of the nation and their rights as women and as citizens.

Women affect and are affected by national and ethnic processes in several different ways (Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 1993, in press). In this article, however, I focus on only one of them, the one which corresponds most closely to the so-called "natural" role of women — to bear children.

The editorial of the special issue on population and reproductive rights of the Oxfam journal *Focus on Gender* (1994, p. 4) states that "biology, conjugal relations and kinship obligations can override women's freedom to decide their own fertility." The argument which will be put forward in this paper is that the positionings and obligations of women to their ethnic and national collectivities also affect and can sometimes override their reproductive rights.

Similarly, in another article in the same issue, Ruth Pearson and Caroline Sweetman (1994) describe the multiplicity of roles in women's lives: "in addition to biological motherhood, women are producers in their own right, and reproduce the workforce through their role as carers and community activists" (p. 46). What is omitted from this list is the ways women reproduce biologically, culturally,

and symbolically their ethnic and national collectivities as well as the workforce, their families, or the citizenry of their states. It is a fundamental dimension which is important both theoretically — in analyzing gender relations — and politically, when considering women's reproductive rights.

"BIOLOGICAL REPRODUCTION" AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF COLLECTIVITIES

The central importance of women's reproductive roles in ethnic and national discourses becomes apparent when one considers that, given the central role the myth (or reality) of "common origin" plays in the construction of most ethnic and national collectivities, one joins the collectivity usually by being born into it. In some cases, especially when nationalist and racist ideologies are very closely interwoven, this might be the only way to join the collectivity, and those who do not comply are excluded. The only way "outsiders" can conceivably join the national collectivity in such cases might be by intermarriage. But even then, as, for example, was the case in Nazi law, the "pure blood" can be contaminated even if one 1/8 or 1/16 is of the "Other's" (Jewish, Black) blood. James Davis in his book *Who Is*

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Black? One Nation's Definition (1993) describes the "one drop rule" which has operated in the construction of the definition of "who is Black" in the United States.

Not incidentally, therefore, those who are preoccupied with the "purity" of the race would also be preoccupied with the sexual relationships between members of different collectivities. Typically, the first (and only) legislative proposal that Rabbi Kahana, the leader of the Israeli fascist party *Kach*, raised when he was a member of the Israeli Parliament would have forbidden sexual relationships between Jews and Arabs (Yuval-Davis, 1987, p. 61). In the 1980s legal permission for people from different "races" to have sex and to marry was one of the first significant steps that the South African government took in its journey toward the abolition of Apartheid.

The inclusion of a new baby in a national collectivity is far from being only a biological issue. In different religious and customary laws, the membership of a child might depend exclusively on the father's membership (as in Islam), the mother's membership (as in Judaism), or it might be open for a dual, or voluntary choice membership. There are a variety of rules and regulations which govern when children born to "mixed parenthood" would become part of the collectivity and the cases when they would not; when they would be considered a separate social category, as was the case in apartheid South Africa (Unterhalter, 1995, pp. 207–220); part of the "inferior" collectivity, as during slavery; or — although this is rarer — part of the "superior" collectivity, as was the case in marriages between Spanish settlers and aristocratic Indians in Mexico (Gutierrez, 1995). Social, as well as legal conventions are of crucial importance here. A man from Ghana tried in the 1970s to claim his British origin, stating the Patriality clause in the British Immigration Act and arguing that his African grandmother was legally married to his British grandfather. The judge rejected his claim, arguing that at this period no British man would genuinely marry an African woman (Women, Immigration & Nationality Group [WING], 1985).

The importance of "common origin" varies among "nations." There are some nations, like the Swiss and the Belgians where several specific ethnic groupings constitute the nation. In settler societies, such as the United States or

Australia, "common destiny" rather than "common origin" might be the crucial factor in the constitution of the nation, but nevertheless there are implicit, if not explicit, hierarchies of desirability of "origin" and culture which underlie its nation-building processes, including immigration and prenatal policies (Stasiulis & Yuval-Davis, 1995). Although the position of women as migrants, immigrants, and refugees can be deeply affected by nationalist constructions of boundaries, differential nationalist prenatal policies can affect the lives of all women in the nation.

PRENATAL POLICIES AND NATIONALIST DISCOURSES OF POPULATION CONTROL

Encouraging, discouraging, and sometimes forcing women to have or not to have children depend on the hegemonic discourses which construct nationalist projects at specific historical moments. One or more of three major discourses tend to dominate nationalist policies of population control. They are: "people as power," the Eugenistic discourse, and the Malthusian discourse. In the following sections of the article I shall examine these discourses, although it is beyond the scope of this article to examine closely the actual processes of implementation of these policies, as well as women's responses to them.

People as power

In this discourse, the future of the nation is seen to depend on its continuous growth. Sometimes this growth can be based also on immigration. At other times, it depends almost exclusively on the reproductive powers of women who are called upon to have more children. The need for people — often primarily for males — can be for a variety of nationalist purposes, civil and military. They can be needed as workers, settlers, and soldiers. For example, currently in Japan the government is offering a reward of 5,000 yen (\$38) a month for each child under school age and twice as much for third children. They are worried, as the contemporary birth rate in Japan is now the lowest in its history. (There is talk about Japanese women having gone on "birth strike," as conditions for raising children are bad). TV advertisements exhort people to "Get a brother for your child."

(Note the advertisements do not include sisters.) The official reason for this campaign is the welfare of the nation — if Japan's population declines it will cause "labour shortages, sluggish economic growth and higher tax burdens to support social services for the elderly." This campaign, however, has raised echoes of the coercive 1930s campaign to "breed and multiply" for the good of the Japanese empire (Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights [WGNRR], 1991).

In settler societies such as Australia, the call has been to "populate or perish" (de Lepervanche, 1989). A certain "critical mass" of people was seen as crucial for the viability of the "nation-building" process there. Although immigration was encouraged as a quick way to achieve this goal, measures were originally taken to keep out "undesirable elements" such as the construed Asian "Yellow Peril." In Israel, also, immigration was highly encouraged to provide people to settle the country. In this case, however, the desired immigration was even more exclusive. It was only Jewish immigration (although it included more or less "desirable" Jewish communities, *Ashkenazi* [western] as opposed to *Mizrakhi* [oriental]). Unlike the sparse Aboriginal population in Australia, the indigenous Palestinian population has been fiercely resisting the Zionist Jewish settlement project and the military aspect of the nation-building process has been predominant (Ehrlich, 1987). In order to encourage Jewish women to have more children, a variety of policies, including child allowances, maternity leave, and for some years after the establishment of the state (following a similar policy in the Soviet Union), declaring an award for "Heroine Mothers" who had 10 children or more. The "demographic race" with the Palestinians has been prominent in Israel's history. Shimon Peres, the Israeli Foreign Minister, has been reported in the Israeli press to have said that "Politics is a matter of demography, not geography" (*Ha'aretz*, 12 October 1993) when explaining his readiness for Israel's (very partial) withdrawal from the Occupied Territories (since the 1967 war). In other societies in which national conflict exists between two national groupings which compete on the same territory, similar importance has been given to the "demographic balance" — as in Lebanon, Cyprus, and the former Yugoslavia. In Slovenia, for example, in 1991, the platform of the major

party DEMOS explicitly stated that "women should not have the right to abort future defenders of the nation" (Zajović, 1994). In a conference on "Women in Deeply Divided Societies," which took place at the university of Belfast in October 1993, some participants expressed the opinion that the pressure for finding a solution to the Northern Ireland problem was going to mount due to the fact that Catholics are going to become, before too long, the majority there.

In Israel, however, the pressure on women to bear more children has not only been connected to the Zionist settlement project but also to the aftermath of the Nazi Holocaust. Not having children — or even marrying and having children "out" of the Jewish community — has been called a "Demographic Holocaust." In the early 1980s a senior Internal Affairs Ministry civil servant attempted (but luckily failed) to force Jewish women who contemplated legal abortions, to watch a video in which appeared not only the usual Anti-Choice images of fetuses as murdered babies, but also of Jewish children in the Nazi concentration camps (Yuval-Davis, 1989, p. 99).

Of course the height of coercion of women to breed children for the sake of the nation occurred in Nazi Germany when Aryan girls of "pure stock" were brought to special brothels to copulate with German soldiers of "pure Aryan stock" to breed the next pure Aryan generation. The Nazis, however, not only forced certain German women to have children; they forced others not to have them. This was part of their Eugenicist discourse on national reproduction.

The Eugenicist discourse

Eugenics, a pseudoscience, concerned itself not with the size of the nation but with its "quality." Concerns about the quality of the nation are, of course, much wider than that. It was concern for the "British Race" which Beveridge (1942) describes in his famous report as the motivation for establishing the British welfare state system. Better health, education, and housing for the poor have been promoted as necessary for improving the quality of the welfare nations. Eugenics, however, did not concern itself with better nurturing, but attempted to predetermine the quality of the nation via "nature," by way of selective breeding. While "pure Aryans" were made to breed,

a programme of forced sterilization was carried out (until successfully resisted) for the “feeble minded” (Bock, 1983). Testimonies at the NGO Forum of the UN Conference on Population and Development Policies in September 1994 in Cairo described similar practices (though not official policies) toward disabled people in many countries in, both, the North and South. But eugenistic notions of “national stock” and the biologization of cultural traits were much more widely spread. The Royal Commission on Population in Britain declared in its 1949 report:

British traditions, manners, and ideas in the world have to be borne in mind. Immigration is thus not a desirable means of keeping the population at a replacement level as it would in effect reduce the proportion of home-bred stock in the population. (Quoted in Riley, 1981)

Today, the country in which population policies are formulated in the strongest eugenistic terms is Singapore, where Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew demanded of highly educated women as their patriotic duty that they produce children who would be genetically superior, while poor uneducated mothers were given a cash award of \$10,000 if they agreed to be sterilized rather than continue to produce their genetically inferior children (Heng & Devan, 1992). However, although not evident always and everywhere to the same extent, differential policies of encouragement and discouragement of childbearing toward different segments of the population (based on class, ethnicity, race, and often all of the above), exist in many countries.

Tamar Lewin, for example, cites a plan to pay welfare mothers (many of whom are Black) in Kansas State in the United States \$500, plus \$50 a year for having the contraceptive Norplant implanted in them. The programme, which was suggested by a right-wing Right to Life representative was supported by an editorial in the local paper “because of the growing poverty among Black welfare mothers” (WGNRR, 1991, p. 9). The United States was the only “Northern” country to have participated in the full-scale experiments on Norplant — but the groups of women to whom it was given were carefully targeted. It is widely known that in many Western countries, from Britain to Australia, unsafe contraceptive devices such as the notorious Depo-Provera injection and sterilizations

were given almost exclusively to poor and minority women (*Reproductive Rights Campaign Newsletters*, 1981–1983).

The Malthusian discourse

The story is somewhat different in many developing countries (or, as they are sometimes called, LACAAP countries — Latin America, Caribbean, African, Asian, and Pacific regions) where there is a fear that the unchecked continuous growth (“explosion”) of the population might bring a national (or international) disaster (Hartman, 1987). There, the population control policies are primarily aimed at reducing the rate of growth overall.

Thomas Malthus, the British clergyman-turned-economist predicted in 1800 that the planet would not be able to carry for long the human population which was growing much faster than global food resources. (His explanation for this was that human population grows each generation at a geometric rate, while the food supplies grow at only an arithmetic rate.) Only human misery — caused by poverty, famine, and pestilence, as well as wars and slaughters — would keep the human population size under control. As Hartman comments, however, (1987, pp. 13–14) Malthus was wrong on two basic counts. Firstly, population growth can be slowed down and eventually stabilized by the voluntary choices of individuals and not just by “natural” disasters. Secondly, Malthus greatly underestimated the capacity of the planet to feed its growing human population and the consequently very different relations between the rates of human production and reproduction. However, Malthusian-type prophecies continued periodically to be heard, although they became increasingly more focused on Third World countries. A very influential book in that respect was *The Population Bomb* which came out in 1968, written by the Stanford University biologist Paul Ehrlich. His focus on the rate of population growth in the Third World combined a racist fear of being “swamped” by nonwestern “Others” with an easy let-out explanation for guilty Western liberal consciences of the persistence of poverty and low standard of living in Third World countries in the postcolonial period.

However, Malthusian discourse has not been just an ideological discourse but has become a cornerstone of population policies in many

Third World countries, themselves, as a major strategy to try and solve the countries' economic and social problems.

The country which has gone furthest in this respect is China. From a policy in the 1950s in which Mao saw in people part of the national power and resources, severe measures were taken so that most Chinese families would not have more than one baby (some minority and rural families were allowed two children if the first child was a girl). In their extreme form, punishments for contravening these measures have involved unemployment for the parents and exclusion from education for the child. The effects of these policies, however, have been quite uneven as a result of the differential policies as well as the fact that the control of the state has been most effective in cities and in central areas of the country. This has produced a demographic shift in the country, skewed toward backward rural areas and minority groups, and there are signs that as a reaction China is now shifting into more eugenic policies of population control, in which "China will use abortions, sterilization and marriage bans to 'avoid new births of inferior quality and heighten the standards of the whole population'" (a quote from the official New China News Agency, *Washington Post*, December 22, 1993). There have also been reports that harsh population control measures have been taken against communities such as the Tibetans (Lentin, in press).

The "national interest" in applying severe population control measures in the South, however, is often not a result of an internal governmental initiative, but is induced from outside the countries because of Northern (especially the United States) perceptions of their own "national interest." A CIA report leaked a few years ago described the effects of high birth rates as leading to "political instability in the Third World which in turn would create security problems for the US" (WGNRR, 1992, p. 9). Thus, the Reagan administration (although, due to the Christian Right's pressures, banning any aid which would have supported abortion services), gave 3 billion dollars for population control as part of its "development" aid — three times the total amount spent for this purpose under Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter. USAID (United States Agency for International Development) money has been given for family planning purposes to 95 countries — including

all the 45 states in Sub-Saharan Africa (*all*), also notably Mexico and the Philippines, despite the fact that, as Elizabeth Sobo remarks (WGNRR, 1991), the population density of people in Africa is 1/10 of that in Europe.

In the New World Order, the World Bank is playing a key role in the formation of population policy by virtue of its leverage over other forms of development finance. Thus, population control measures can become part of the "structural adjustment" package. There is high pressure on women (and it is almost always only on women — who are an easier "captive audience" — usually after they give birth, especially by Caesarean section) to be sterilized or to use other long-term contraceptives from IUD to Depo-Provera to Norplant. Sometimes the means used are more subtle. Apparently USAID has given \$350,000 to one of Nigeria's top musicians, King Sunny Ade, to sing about family planning and having fewer children (he, of course, has 12 children himself). This is part of a 5-year programme of the Population Communication Services Centre at John Hopkins University which has \$35.4 million for improving the response in "culturally appropriate ways to influence family planning acceptance and use" (WGNRR, 1991). The policymakers must have understood that somehow they had been getting it wrong since 1980; when I visited Egypt and saw Cairo covered with huge posters showing a smiling family of a man, a woman, a boy, a girl and a radio transistor, my taxi driver commented: "The poor fools — who is going to look after them when they are old?"

This remark of the taxi driver is important because it draws our attention to the social context in which these policies are being made. It is important to note that there is often a serious conflict between collective national and individual interest in terms of the number of children one has. When there are no welfare structures to look after the elderly and the ill, it is crucial for people to have enough healthy children to support them. Moreover, when there are no developed public health services and the rate of infant mortality is high — there is a real interest for women to become pregnant as many times as possible. As Hartman (1987, p. 8) has pointed out, there has never been a case where the rate of population growth has gone down, where the rate of infant mortality has not gone down as well. This is especially

important to remember in times of structural adjustment policies, because at the same time as creating pressures to cut down the rate of population growth, they also cut down funds for public health care and the support required for women to bear and rear healthy babies. As Sonia Correa (1994, p. 7) reports, a massive international campaign by the reproductive health and rights movement succeeded in shifting the political agenda for the UN Conference for Population and Development policies in Cairo, so that its resolutions spoke no more just about family planning and contraceptive services, but about reproductive health which encompasses maternal care and child care and the prevention of cancer and sexually transmitted diseases. Although there is a great distance between formal UN declarations and their implementation, this shift in the public political discourse is all for the good.

However, the absence of public health and welfare infrastructures is not the only social factor which needs to be taken into consideration, as the fierce resistance to women's reproductive rights by the Vatican/Iran's fundamentalist alliance during the Cairo and Beijing conferences can attest. Moreover, in social and cultural systems where the social value of women (as well as their ability to exercise some social power especially when old) depends on whether or not they have sons, the number of children women bear can depend on much more thorough and all-encompassing processes of social transformation, especially in relation to what Sonia Correa and Rosalind Petchesky (1994) have called women's social rights. Processes of globalization — economic, political, and social — would also create contradictory pressures on women's fertility.

In addition to the overall context, we need to look also, as Rani Bang and Abhay Bang (1992) point out, at the immediate effects the usage of high-tech forms of contraception can have on women's lives. In societies where so many women suffer from gynaecological conditions anyway — which are not taken care of when they are sterilized or implanted with Norplant — their physical discomfort largely grows. And in cultures where women, when they are bleeding, are prevented from carrying out ritual tasks, and their husbands cannot have sex with them — this can also have serious ramifications for their lives, including being deserted or divorced by their husbands, as

many testimonies at the NG Forum of the Cairo UN Conference brought to light. These testimonies also included cases of women whose husbands left them because of the after-effects of an early menopause once Norplant was removed — so the physical side effects can be long-term as well as short-term.

It is important to remember, however, that it can also be nongovernmental formal and informal groupings, both religious (such as the Catholic Church) and national, which exert pressure and sometimes force on women to have or not to have children. For example, there has been a strong pressure on Palestinian women to bear more children for the national struggle, as a Palestinian woman told me: "We need to have one son to fight and get killed, one son to go to prison, one son to go to the oil countries to make money, and one son to look after us when we are old." And a popular Palestinian saying (before the uprising, the *Intifadah*, began in the late 1980s) was: "The Israelis beat us in the borders, we beat them in the bedrooms." On the other hand, the prospect of children born out of wedlock, and even more so, outside the "proper" religious and national boundaries, can be considered as bringing shame on the family. Women who are suspected of "fraternizing" with "the enemy" are often severely punished. The Bosnian children born of war rapes who are now abandoned in hospitals and orphanages because of the shame to the family/ethnic group, constitute another case in point.

**A CONCLUDING REMARK —
"REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS,"
NATIONAL REPRODUCTION, AND
FEMINIST POLITICS**

As has been pointed out elsewhere (Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 1991), women's membership in their national and ethnic collectivities is of a double nature. On the one hand, women, like men, are members of the collectivity. On the other hand, there are always specific rules and regulations which relate to women as women. This is especially important to remember when we consider the political implications of the ways women are constructed as biological reproducers of "the nation." Despite the fact that usually, if not always, in the sex/gender systems in their societies men are dominant, women are not just

passive victims, or even objects, of the ideologies and policies aimed at controlling their reproduction. On the contrary, very often it is women, especially older women, who are given the roles of the cultural reproducers of the nation and are empowered to exert control over other women who may be constructed as "deviants." As very often this is the main source of social power allowed to women, they can become fully engaged in it.

Most of the feminist discourse which relates to the reproductive rights of women tends to relate to women in individualistic terms, as does the slogan of "women's rights" as "human rights." As Correa and Petchesky (1994, pp. 109–110) point out, critics of rights discourse have pointed out that the value and meaning of rights are always contingent upon political and social contexts, are indeterminate and are dependent on the social categories and collectivities to which people belong. Specifically in relation to women's reproductive rights, there has been a growing concern during the last few years among "women of colour" that the cooption of such slogans by international agencies and the Right is part of a demographic war which, if not completely genocidal, is aimed at stunting the growth and power of Black and Third World people (for a summary of these debates see Petchesky & Weiner, 1990). These antiindividualistic concerns, on the other hand, can become coopted by nationalist and religious fundamentalists who object — as was the case in the recent UN Human Rights conference in Vienna — to any international constitutional guarantees for women's reproductive rights, as interference in the collective human rights of their nations which include the right to follow their own "culture."

There is no space in this paper fully to develop a framework for feminist politics on reproductive rights which might take account of the above pitfalls (see Yuval-Davis, in press). However, such a framework would: (a) take account of the fact that women are not just "individuals" but are also members of national, ethnic, and racial collectivities, as well as of a specific class, sexuality, and stage in the life cycle; (b) recognize that "culture" is never an essentialist and homogeneous body of traditions and customs, but a rich resource, usually full of internal contradictions, which is always used selectively in ethnic cultural and religious projects within specific power relations and

political discourse; and (c) develop a notion of "transversal politics" (Yuval-Davis, 1994) which is based on dialogues and coalition politics which give recognition to the specific positionings of those who participate in them as well as to the "unfinished knowledge" that each such situated positioning can offer (Haraway, 1988; Hill-Collins, 1990).

Women are not just individuals, nor are they just agents of their collectivities. "Reproductive Rights" campaigns should take account of the multiplexity and multidimensionality of identities within contemporary society, without losing sight of the differential power dimension of different collectivities and groupings within it. "Reproductive rights" should be seen as a vital part of the more general struggle for women's emancipation which, in turn, should be seen as a vital part of the more general struggle for the democratization of society.

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