



The Means of Reproduction: Sex, Power, and the Future of the World

By Michelle Goldberg
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Review by Robert B. Tapp

IN RESEARCHING THE follow-up to her first book, the *New York Times* bestseller *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (2006), Michelle Goldberg impressively prowled four continents with an inquiring mind and a searching pen. While abortion is always the flashpoint issue, Goldberg notes that the focus of *The Means of Reproduction* is “rather, about how great international powers have worked to influence the rights of the world’s women, and how, conversely, a women’s rights will ultimately shape the future.” Once it becomes a recognized human right for any woman to control her own reproduction, contraception becomes the primary means, with safe abortion simply a backup for occasions when contraception fails. But implementing this knowledge and value is fraught with obstacles.

Goldberg reminds us again and again of the ways that time alters tactics. What made sense in one decade may need revision in the next. Chapter by chapter she introduces us to women and men around the world working creatively at transforming the status of women.

In Central America Goldberg reports that traditional Catholic and growing evangelical Protestant forces have intertwined. This region now has both the world’s strictest abortion laws and highest rate of what Goldberg terms clandestine abortion. So even though journalists might call the governments socialist or even communist, an oppressive stance regarding the sacredness of pregnancy has persisted. According to the World Health Organization, there are four unsafe abortions for every ten births in Central America.

Goldberg revisits the politics of fertility during the Cold War. Panic within non-communist countries that the enemy might be outbreeding them supported restric-

tions on contraceptives. Whereas more than 60 percent of the world population now lives in countries with liberal abortion laws, in large parts of Africa and Latin America, as well as in Asia and the Middle East, abortion is either banned or allowed only to save a woman’s life. Goldberg writes that despite political changes, such laws are largely “the relics of colonial constitutions promulgated by European countries that have since abandoned such restrictions for themselves.”

Thanks to researchers like Adrienne Germain, in the early 1970s overpopulation began to be seen, in Goldberg’s words, as “the symptom of women’s oppression, rather than as a crisis that trumped individual women’s rights. Give women what they need to thrive, the new findings suggested, and they’d solve some of the world’s most pressing problems.” As U.S. feminism progressed, abortion became the issue that united a new religious right and conservative Catholics. George H. W. Bush imposed a global gag rule on U.S. funding for family planning, Clinton revoked it, George W. Bush re-instated it, and Obama has again revoked it. At the 1994 Cairo conference, the culture wars (against modernity) went global and an alliance of Christians and conservative Muslims (one that Goldberg describes as “odd but clarifying”) emerged, forming a “united front against the dread forces of feminism, secularism, and liberalism.”

As is now well known, female genital cutting is a coming-of-age ritual in some Islamic cultures. This is not only a destructive surgery, but one that diminishes sexual pleasure for a woman. Disturbingly enough, major human rights organizations only began to address this issue after the creation of Equality Now in 1992. Such culture-specific controls of women moved beyond earlier Enlighten-

ment universalism vs. cultural conservatism debates when some postmodern cultural relativists entered the argument—on the side of local customs! Human rights organizations were also slow to address issues of honor killing and sex trafficking.

Further complexities emerged in Europe with concerns about gender imbalance, graying population, and immigrant labor. This meant that many governments slowed their support for family planning. In counterpoint were concerns about achieving zero population growth. This was then countered by conservative opposition from pro-life groups.

Gender ratios at birth provide an empirical measure of “missing girls” in India and China today. Both countries have used strong governmental measures to lower birth rates, and amniocentesis facilitates elimination of female fetuses. Dowry systems in both countries also encourage female infanticide. India’s population of girls are still fed less than boys and given less medical care says Goldberg, noting that even in Kerala, India’s most matriarchal state, there is a slight female deficit. She concludes that “as long as women lack an identity without a husband or a son, sex-selective abortion will continue to deform India’s—and Asia’s—demographics.”

Chapter eight of *The Means of Reproduction*, titled “The Birth Strike,” describes in considerable detail the 2007 Warsaw gathering of the World Congress of Families where conservatives set aside their religious differences to deplore small families in developed societies. Closer analysis by Goldberg reveals the odd nature of this situation. Conservative Catholic Poland had a very low birthrate (1.27 children per woman) while secular France had the highest birthrate (1.99). Norway’s was 1.9 and Sweden’s was 1.85. The explanation clearly lies in education and economics rather than any government restrictions on contraception. When women can have both families and careers, the birthrates increase. Important components are adequate paid parental leave, day care, pre-school, and after-school facilities.

Nevertheless, birthrates in developed countries are typically below the 2.1 replacement figure. Improved public health thus means smaller and older populations, and few countries are ready or able to assimilate the number of immigrants to replenish their workforces. There is a widespread anxiety that Europe will become “Eurabia.”

The higher current fertility rates of the United States, however, afford no useful examples here. Religious forces have reduced sex education (or substituted a failed abstinence-only alternative), leading to higher rates of illegitimacy. Twenty percent of U.S. births are into homes at poverty level (due to the increasing maldistribution of wealth)

as compared to a 5 percent level in Nordic countries. In addition, a significant portion of American women are in the workforce out of economic necessity rather than career satisfaction.

One likely scenario may be that as conservatives urge increased birthrates without providing the now-known incentives and supports, increased immigration will remain the backup solution—further reducing living standards for the resident workforce.

No reader can follow Goldberg’s travels and questions without learning many new things. “New” because the old either hasn’t worked or no longer can fit the new world. In what she terms a “fulcrum in history” the year 2008 marked the first time that a majority of the human population lived in cities. Large families made sense when we were clearing lands and farming—but no longer. These growing urban populations need more food, more, clean water, more energy—raising once more the dreaded Malthusian solutions.

The new scourge of HIV/AIDS includes babies as well, and spreads more rapidly when religious and pronatalist policies restrict condom use. Serious researchers instead remind of an unmet need for contraception among women who are sexually active and want to avoid pregnancy, and yet aren’t using birth control. In developing countries this is 15 percent of married women and 7 percent of unmarried women.

The book concludes that “there is no force for good on the planet as powerful as the liberation of women.” Humanists will agree and will remind others that such equality is a central concomitant of the this-worldliness flowing from the Enlightenment. The conservative forces of every religious tradition oppose this element of modernism. Humanists also know that a combination of education and freedom is necessary if cultures are to transcend older moralities and theories of gender superiority that were rooted in pre-scientific theories of natural law and divine decree.

No nation has established democracy and ensured human rights without overcoming conservative resistance from the men clinging to their power. And no traditional religion has supported the change. But facts do count, and Goldberg has rendered them both readable and compelling. [5]

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