
Women and Infanticide

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Où il est question du lien brutal qui existe entre l'infanticide et la pauvreté.

1979 was The Year of the Child. Within this framework we have heard children referred to as 'our most valuable resource,' 'a precious commodity,' as if children were some untapped Athabasca tar sands. It would be more accurate to admit that it is the idea of 'youth' that we value and hold dear, not children themselves and certainly not the children of the poor. Within the middle class, children are a privilege, a choice to be considered with all the personal, psychological and economic effects weighed. Women living in a marginal economic situation, poor women, do not have that luxury. It is not just a question of their low access to birth control and abortion. It is also a question of currency. Children are the currency of women — especially women who do not have the educational or economic resources of society available to them: women living on public assistance, women working at low-paying jobs, filling in the untidy corners of the job market, working where no one else will work and doing it for less money. For these women, reproduction is production. It is a way of entering the 'main stream' of the society, of making a contribution that is denied to them in the market place. This desire to reproduce must not be degraded or trivialized. It is no less admirable than the desire of the middle class to reproduce. If the outcome is less acceptable: if baby doesn't have her own room let alone her own library of Children's Classics to expand her young and curious mind, it should not be seen as bad planning on the part of her mother. It has to be seen for what it is: that the failure is not the failure of an individual, but rather the failure of a society to provide a climate, primarily economic but also social, where women are not subordinate to men, and where all members of that society have an equal access to the resources of the society.

Equal Pay? Not Yet

Are women more 'poor' than men? Judge for yourself. Working women for instance: according to the U.S. Labor Department's Women's Bureau, in 1955 the average pay for women was 63 percent of the average pay for men. But by 1977, the average working woman's pay had dropped to only 58 percent of what the average male was earning. Similar figures are available for Canada and most of Europe. No doubt the disparity is even greater in economies where the education of women is still a questionable practice, thereby eliminating most women from higher paying jobs. The surprise of these figures is that this drop in average wages as compared to men's salaries coincided with the rise of the Women's Movement and its attendant agitation for more jobs and equal pay. It is likely that more women have entered the working force in the last twenty years, but they have entered at the bottom of the wage scale and are more likely to stay there. Equal pay and advancement are not yet realities for most women.

What about families living on public assistance? According to the Family Benefits Work Group, a Toronto-based coalition, a woman living in Toronto with two children who receives Family Benefits (Mother's Allowance) can expect a yearly income of \$5,248.32. Statistics Canada's 1976 Poverty Line figure for that same family, a mother with two children, is \$7,613.00. This means that the provincial government is providing an income for this family that is more than \$2,300.00 a year *below* the national government's recognized bottom-line definition of poverty. Below poverty.

But what do these figures have to do with infanticide? Surely all women whether they are working or on welfare don't kill their children? No, they don't. Only a tiny percentage of parents seriously harm or kill their children, but the correlation of children who are seriously hurt or killed by their own parents with the serious economic stress those families live in is well documented. To call infanticide a personal

response of an individual psychosis, an isolated anti-social act, by definition occurring *outside* the social order is to again miss the point. The difficulty in looking at infanticide is that, when the actual act is considered, it *is* the act of an individual: a parent, usually the mother of the child, causes the child to die either directly and wilfully by violence, or indirectly by neglect or criminal negligence, such as leaving a child unattended in a house that catches fire and burns, killing the child.

Liberation or Neglect?

Somehow it is easier for us to relate neglect, and the subsequent death of a child to economic causes. It is more obvious. It should also be obvious that neglect is a relative term. What is 'liberation' in a middle-class home may be classified 'neglect' in a poor home. Those living on public assistance are held to a stricter moral code than their more independent counterparts. With divorce almost as common as marriage, a middle-class woman is urged to establish 'new relationships' after her marriage breaks up. A woman living on Mother's Allowance who does this will be cut off her welfare benefits, taken to court, fined a substantial amount of money, possibly put in jail, and she can also be evicted from her house or apartment if she is living in public housing. So much for liberation. Economically, a woman living on public assistance doesn't have much leeway either. Living on welfare with children to support means being a good manager of your money — a good manager with lots of self-control. Any impulsive 'splurge' will not mean just cutting back on treats for next week; there may well not be enough food at the end of the month before the next check comes. And children need to eat. Likewise, getting out of the house is a problem for a woman living on a marginal income. Whether she needs to get out for practical reasons, like grocery shopping or a doctor's appointment, or for entertainment and relief from the responsibilities of childcare, a mother who is poor is more open to the charge of

'neglect' if she leaves her house than is a middle-class mother—the most obvious reason being that a woman with a sufficient income can probably afford to hire a babysitter. But even if she chooses to leave her child unattended, a middle-class mother probably lives in a safer neighbourhood, in more adequate, less dangerous housing — a house less likely to catch fire and more likely to have screens on the windows — a safer place to raise a child. For people with limited incomes, 'safety' and 'neighbourhoods' are choices of luxury not available to them. Housing is a question of what they can get for the least amount of money. But if neglect is understandably linked to economic deprivation, I would suggest that so is the harsher, more brutal nature of child abuse — the actual physical injury of infants and children sometimes to the point of death. I offer this not by way of excuse but more to establish a cause underlying this seemingly inexplicable fact — those who have given us life, our parents, are most likely to take that life away when we are least capable of defending ourselves, when we are children. The complete helplessness of human infants and the long, protracted dependency of childhood makes infants and children vulnerable to physical force and violence. Most of this violence occurs in families where one or both parents have experienced beatings when they were children themselves and in families living in either a temporary or, more likely, a chronic state of material deprivation — that is, poverty. These two circumstances, either separately or in combination, occur in an overwhelming percentage of the cases of child abuse that result in severe injury or death to the child. Sadism and outright psychosis do not. Neither does altruism, which is sometimes given as a 'cause' for infanticide. Infanticide does not proceed from an excessive love or caring for one's child — it is a disturbance. And sometimes that disturbance is within the survival instinct of the adult. Infanticide is high during times of war and famine. We can understand this; somehow it seems reasonable. But we should be aware that this is not parents killing children to save them from suffering. It is usually the killing of newborn infants for whom there isn't enough food and the starvation of selected children, usually the youngest in the family so that the older children and the adults can survive. But what is the disturbance that is occurring in this culture (here I am talking about North America and Europe) that continues to make infanticide a major cause of death among infants and small children. Says Urie Bronfenbrenner, professor of child development at Cornell University, Infanticide in North America has been increasing since 1957. Infant homicides accounted for 3.1% of total homicides in 1964, but the rate of 5.4 deaths per 100,000 was higher than that for all persons 55 and over. The 74% increase

from 2.2% in 1957 placed infanticide in 1964 at the highest record level since 1945.

Since our culture is neither engaged in a war nor enduring a famine, this figure is hard to understand. In reading about family violence in general, I came across a curious fact in several different sources:

In this country (England) murder is overwhelmingly a domestic crime in which men kill their wives and (then) their children (in that order of frequency) and women kill their children.

A Harvard University study found that, The total sample of 148 murder-suicide offenders included 53 mothers who killed their children under sixteen, 62 men who killed their wives . . . 15 men who killed their children and in some instances their wives as well, and 3 women who killed a husband or lover.

An earlier study done in France:

J. Delay writes that infanticide appears to be the commonest expression of pathological aggressiveness in women, but is rare in men, where infanticide is generally accompanied by murder of the wife and is seldom accompanied by attempted suicide. Delay quotes Naacke's work comprising 161 'family' murders, perpetrated by men with homicide of their wives in 66% of the cases, of a child in 6.4% and of their wives and children in 6.4%; whereas women, in 76.5% of the cases killed the child and in only 6% of the cases, the husband.

Marriage as Ownership

There is cross-cultural persistence in these findings: in family murders, men are most likely to kill their wives, and women to kill their children. But, I do not think for a moment that this is a 'kick the dog' causal relationship — that family violence flows downward from man to woman to child, balancing neatly into an equal equation. Men murder their wives because they believe there is an ownership clause in a marriage licence. In murdering their wives, men are exercising their patriarchal control within the close biological system of the family. Although poverty and the stress of deprivation no doubt contribute in a large number of these murders, statistics suggest that there is indeed a 'classlessness' about wife-beating and the murder of wives by husbands. This is to say, that crime of all kinds is more common in the lower socioeconomic class, but this particular crime shows up more democratically distributed throughout class strata. The rich and the middle class do it too. This is not the case with child abuse, particularly when the abuse seriously injures or kills the child. I am suggesting that the causes for violence between husbands and wives, mostly directed toward the wife, and violence of parents toward their children is of a different origin. The subordination of women within the society makes them targets for the vio-

lence of their husbands, no matter what economic class they are in.

This subordination is both psychological and economic. Therefore any consideration of Feminism must contain a reevaluation of the class system as it exists now and has for hundreds of years. Economic redistribution needs to take place not only along class lines but equally along sex lines. If all members of the social body were able to realize their potential economically as well as socially, women as well as men, there is reason to believe that there would be a dramatic drop in the domestic violence rate.

Battered Bodies

Early in 1977 a local Los Angeles television station presented a program on child abuse. There was the now-familiar but still shocking catalogue of beating, intentional burns inflicted on toddlers, drownings from neglect, children starved and locked in closets for weeks — all detailed by doctors and social workers, those representatives of the social body who have first-hand contact with these small victims. The program was well-presented and clear and a good illustration of how 'child abuse' has become a public issue.

These professionals, who exposed the effects of parents' violence to an initially disbelieving public, were motivated, at least in part, by a genuine humanist outrage at the pain and suffering inflicted on society's most vulnerable group — those too young and small to defend themselves. They knew that simply showing people the effects of violence — the battered bodies — was the wrong tactic if the public was going to be educated as to the extent of the problem and also be supportive of agencies created to label, service, store and rehabilitate this deviant segment of the population, the abusing parents *and* their injured children.

A problem that is exposed and defined by professionals, to the media, then has to be administrated and serviced; thus creating a need for the specialized services of medical doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, researchers in sociology, social workers and all of the attendant administrators. But first you have to create the need. And this cannot be done by simply showing the physical damage. Looking at a beaten child is horrible. Without other information, the viewer will probably conclude the person performing this outrage to be 'bad.' And only other people can be 'bad', but anyone can be 'sick.' It is this transition from 'bad' to 'sick' that the practitioners need to accomplish. This can be done by easing the perceived 'problem' out of the lower socioeconomic class (where people who deviate from the normal behaviour and in need of punishment are seen to be 'bad') into the middle class (where the people with the same deviations are more likely to be seen as 'sick' and in

need of treatment).

The television program is a good example of how this distortion is carried out and possibly *why*, in the face of contradictory facts, this half-truth continues to be put forward. We pick up the program in progress, after the professionals have catalogued the physical horrors of the 'beaten child.' Next a representative of a local self-help group for abusing parents was interviewed. His group is similar in purpose to Parents Anonymous. When asked to give a profile of an abusing parent, he sketched a composite Citizen of the World — a black-white-rich-poor-white collar-blue collar-happens-in-any neighbourhood kind of person. He concluded by looking into the camera and saying, 'Anyone can be an abusing parent.' And of course he's right — in a way. Child abuse and neglect do occur in all classes of society. But to imply a democratic distribution throughout the society, existing *outside* of economic realities, is to ignore the evidence.

In every study of the subject done in North America a strong statistical relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect is drawn. The American Humane Association's 1976 data based on 19,923 validated reports made to central registries of child abuse turned up these figures:

49.6% of the families had incomes under \$5,000. 65.4% were under \$7,000. 42% were receiving public assistance at the time of the report. Only 14.9% had incomes of \$11,000 or over and only 9% of the families had incomes of \$13,000 or above. The median family income of the whole sampling was \$5,051 (which is the 1976 poverty level for a family of 4), as compared with the \$13,900 mean income for all American families in 1976.

Poverty and Infanticide

This relation between infanticide and poverty is important because it counters the 'public scrutiny' argument offered by those who maintain that child abuse is a problem that knows no class. According to this argument, the lower classes are more likely to turn up in these statistics because of greater public scrutiny of their lives. While there is no doubt a greater involvement of the poor with social agencies and hence public scrutiny, it cannot account for the overwhelming correlation of low economic status with infanticide. As David Kaplun and Robert Reich found in a study done in New York City in 1968 involving 112 children who had been murdered (over two-thirds by a parent), 'Most of the families (70%) lived in areas of severe poverty and almost all were known to the city's public welfare agency.'

And David Gil (1970) found that injuries of children were more likely to be serious or fatal among families whose annual income was below \$3,500.

These figures could not be any clearer.

No matter how 'under-reported' abuse and neglect are in the middle and upper classes, severe injury and death of their children could never be hidden to the extent that discovery would bring these figures into a true democratic distribution across all economic class lines. The evidence sits too heavily on the lower end of the socio-economic scale.

If the evidence is this clear, why does the media continue to put forward the myth that child abuse occurs *without* regard to economic status and is proportionately present in all classes? A look at the conclusion of the Los Angeles television program may give some indication. We pick up the show after the statement 'Anyone can be an abusing parent' has been delivered. The scene changes to a park. A young woman is sitting on the ground under a tree. She is of ordinary appearance. A voice-over tells the viewer that about three years ago this young woman killed her child, a three and a half year-old boy, by beating him. She speaks:

He came into the room and he'd messed himself and I hit him, a couple of times, hard. Just slapped him and then he started to cry and cry and I just kept hitting him, only with my fist and then both fists. And I know he was trying to get away from me and he was on the bed and I was hitting him. I just kept doing it. He fell off onto the floor and I kept hitting him. I guess I was mad but I just couldn't stop. Then when I did stop I could see he was dead and I felt so bad. I remember he said, 'Why are you doing this' and I remember hitting him.

The effect on the viewer is extraordinary. As she speaks, we search her face for tell-tale signs of abnormality — excessive in-breeding, mental deficiency, 'badness' — anything would do. But it isn't there; only an overwhelming ordinariness. Her voice is flat and emotionless. We see her in an ambivalent natural setting. There is a passing reference to the fact that she was a single parent at the time of the murder, but no other demographic information. We do not see her in her home, at the scene of the crime. There are no clues, visual or otherwise, to place her in a socioeconomic class. There is no reference to possible stress, economic or otherwise, she might have been suffering under at that time. Just an isolated individual who raged out of control for a few moments and the result was death to her child. Infanticide.

Possible causes for this particular act of violence can only be inferred by the viewer in remembering back to the beginning of the TV program. Here doctors and social workers laid out not only the physical effects of child abuse and neglect, but also speculated on the reasons for it. By far the most prevalent causes in their analyses, were psychological ones — the failure of people to be 'nurturing', the parents' need

to be 'mothered' themselves, treating the child like a plaything and rejecting her or him when she or he made demands. Poverty along with a lack of education were mentioned as causative factors in child abuse but mostly in connection with neglect. No mention was made of physical deprivation over a period of years, unsafe, inadequate housing, or an almost total lack of educational and employment opportunities — conditions that many people experience daily from birth until death, as possible stress factors contributing to the abuse of children by their own parents. Only individual psychological inadequacies aided and abetted by 'our violent society' are given the implied responsibility for the death of this child.

Thus we view the young infanticidal mother on the television screen with a combination of guilt (since we are all potential collaborators in this crime or a similar one, at least according to the previous speaker) and regret (for the child who died, the mother who killed and ourselves for having to hear about it). It is a way of involving the middle class, those with personal guilt and heart-felt humanist concern, in an issue that they might otherwise have felt alienated from at first exposure. 'It could happen to you' is a powerful mover, psychologically and socially, to any group of people who have the luxury of time for self-reflection. And of course this has not been an entirely wasted effort.

In the Name of Love

For example, the issue of wife-beating has brought to public attention the role of women within the family and hence the society. Wife-beating as an act clearly illustrates women in an owned and occupied territory — not just an attitude but a physical reality. By being such a clear illustration, 'wife-beating' as a defined problem has allowed women to mobilize and direct a challenge at the heart of the society — the family and its hierarchy. In the process of this challenge, a more diffused public education about the issue has occurred and the individual suffering of many women has been relieved at least temporarily. This is progress of a sort. Likewise the issue of child abuse, especially as it has been defined to the middle class, has exposed the violence that we all direct toward children in the name of discipline. No one would dispute that parents do not have the right to kill their children; but only recently has it been suggested that parents also do not have the right to exercise rigid authoritarian control over the lives of children, enforcing this control physically and psychologically. The most frequently occurring form of child abuse in any class of society is the discipline ministered in the name of love: the slapping, yanking, merciless scolding, screaming, threatening, pushing and shoving of children that forms the collective experience of 'growing up.' Recogniz-

ing and challenging this authoritarian streak in ourselves has been an important function of the move to expose child abuse and neglect.

Yet calling child abuse an *individual* problem means that the serious problems of child rearing can be ignored and the unequal distribution of the social and economic resources in society can continue to be masked. As 'child abuse' is packaged for the social services market, public awareness increases, and the appearance of an 'epidemic' is introduced. Writing in 1938, Tannenbaum said:

Societal reactions to deviance can be characterized as a kind of 'dramatization of evil' such that a person's deviance is made a public issue. The stronger the reaction to the evil, the more it seems to grow. The reaction itself seems to generate the very thing it sought to eliminate.

Thus the 'epidemic' is created — an epidemic of monstrosity. One that entails mass confessions, individual atonement, selective punishment and generalized 'help' in the form of social agencies created to administer the assistance. The danger is that the public view of the problem will follow the plotted curve of a fad: a starting point of relative low-awareness, the sudden mushrooming of interest and subsequent knowledge resulting in a disproportionate bulge in the curve followed by a rapid dropping off of interest — the market of 'concern' has been saturated. Then the 'issue' will be left with whatever institutions that have been set up to administer the help, but public interest will have passed on to some new problem. If during the 'fad' the real causes were not brought forward, there is a good chance they will remain hidden and masked forever. That is why it is important to look at the statistics of child abuse and the killing of children *now* while public interest in the 'problem' is high.

The Scapgoat

In Canada it is estimated that 150 children are killed by a parent each year. Most cases involve the mother killing the child. What makes a woman infanticidal? Poverty and deprivation certainly, but I would also suggest that the social body itself plays a direct role in this continuing statistic of women and infanticide by continuing to place women in a subordinate economic and social position while delegating more and more responsibilities for the care of the society's children to the individual woman, locking her even more tightly within the hierarchy of the nuclear family. If a woman with few personal resources, a woman who is poor, with no personal support system to rely on, a woman rendered passive from years of dealing with institutionalized 'helping' agencies — if this woman kills her child it is both a personal breakdown and a crack in the society. As the

society exists now, it is the personal breakdown that is administered to; the woman is either jailed (punished) or institutionalized (helped). Either way she is the scapegoat. The society is able to recoil in horror at the unspeakable act and shortly after to feel absolved. Balance is restored; a sore has festered, broken, and healing seems possible. In the course of the public inquiry, either new institutions and recording-registries will be recommended or existing ones will be reprimanded for incompetence. (Interestingly, the agencies reprimanded are usually those staffed primarily by women, i.e. The Children's Aid Society, Public Health Nurses and social workers in general; doctors or lawyers are seldom seen to be 'responsible' in infanticide.) But this process is essentially a hypocrisy. The child that the society cares so passionately about in death was little more than an administrative problem in life. It is not that individual people don't care; they do. But the economic structure of this society does not allow for anything other than stopgap measures to deal with child abuse and infanticide. The fundamental support structures that women need, right now, to enable them to climb out of their economic subordination are not there: jobs are either unavailable or low-paying, day care is not available in sufficient quantity and isolation continues to put the real responsibility for children onto women, perpetuating the dependence of women on inadequate social agencies.

In the distant past, the society at large was responsible for infanticide. Babies and young children were systematically killed or neglected to the point of death for religious reasons or, more likely, for economic need. It was a form of birth control. Our society, which frowns on murder, gave the responsibility of infanticide to the mother. And there it has stayed. In the past it was a crime punishable by death for the mother, always. Now it is a problem of administration. And still, although we are more humane than our ancestors, although childhood is not quite so dangerous as before, we must admit to the fact that we really care very little for our children. The Year of the Child has passed. A new 'social problem' will present itself and child abuse and neglect will fade from our collective memory (remember 'juvenile delinquency?') because, really, it is just a symptom.

Domestic murder is an inefficient way to control the growth of the population. By this I mean that the poor will never kill off one another in great enough numbers to rid the society of poverty. And yet this is what we're asking by continually ignoring the real causes of our so-called 'social' problems and continuing to create programs around the symptoms. Family violence, the beating, abuse and murder that occurs among husbands, wives and their children of which infanticide is a part, is a symptom of two greater maladies: the inequal distri-

bution of this society's resources among its members and the oppression of women within this society. Is it possible to imagine a society where the 'symptomatic' relief of these sufferings is not necessary? Yes, but it cannot be a society built on the privilege of dominance that exists today.

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