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Birth Control in Popular Twentieth-Century Periodicals*

ROSANNA L. BARNES**

Spurned as a subject unfit for even private conversation, let alone the pages of a magazine, in the early twentieth century, birth control is now discussed openly in every kind of communications medium. In the early years of the birth control movement, however, only journals which enjoyed some kind of financial security would dare include such an inflammatory subject. As Americans encountered economic difficulties in the 1930s and adopted a more enlightened view of sexual relations, birth control became an acceptable topic, even to those who opposed the practice. Public acceptance of and interest in the issue has been reflected in periodical coverage of the subject.

Limiting the size of a family "is the most hurtful, and wicked sin that was ever indulged in since the world was created." So wrote one of the readers of *Harper's Weekly* in 1915 (October 2, 331) expressing his objection to a series of articles which the magazine had published in support of birth control, a radical new issue in the early twentieth century. The opinion was indicative of the attitude of most Americans at that time on the subject of voluntary family limitation. It was an opinion reflected in American periodicals primarily by the paucity of coverage. Only a few magazines dared to court the wrath of the reader by discussing such a socially taboo topic in the hallowed medium of print. But attitudes change, though what causes them to do so is still a moot point; and in the 1960s, the magazine which fails to include the subject of birth control is rare.

In one of the outstanding studies of *Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, Theodore Peterson, Dean of Journalism and Communications at the University of Illinois, sug-

gested that when dealing with the complex problem of trying to assess the role of magazines in producing attitudinal changes, it is helpful to divide periodicals into two kinds. The first plays a much more significant role in producing changes in attitude than does the other. Peterson labels this type of magazine a "journal of opinion," a periodical, that is, that attempts to mold attitudes and does not, therefore, hesitate to present unpopular views and controversial subjects. Such magazines, however, must enjoy some degree of financial independence if they are to survive because readers apparently stop buying a periodical when they disapprove of its contents. The second kind of magazine is one published primarily to earn a profit. This commercial publication, as Peterson calls it, must of necessity concern itself with attracting readers either from the viewpoint of selling individual copies or of attracting advertisers. Such periodicals, Peterson maintains, are therefore essentially conservative in content. To attract large numbers of readers, the magazine must give them what they want; that is, it must reflect the interests of the general public. The publishers, then, must be "generally disposed to accept the social and cultural standards of the majority, which rarely in history has been responsible for the introduction of new ideas or for experimentation." (Peterson, 1964, 445) The

* This study is based on a tabulation and survey of articles indexed in the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* under the subject headings of "Birth Control" and "Contraception." It is part of a larger study on changing attitudes toward birth control in twentieth-century America.

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inference is, of course, that commercial magazines will *reflect* prevailing social attitudes whereas journals of opinion will, to some admittedly impossible degree to measure, *stimulate* change in social attitudes. Further, if it is true that the commercial magazines reflect public opinion, then the extent to which those magazines give coverage to a topic is indicative of the degree of public interest in the subject. If coverage is low, then apparently public interest is low, and vice versa.

An examination of the extent to which various magazines included the extremely controversial topic of birth control within their pages during the twentieth century gives substantial support to Peterson's position and indicates the rise and decline of public interest in and acceptance of the subject. It was, indeed, the so-called journals of opinion which dared, at a time when birth control was almost an unmentionable topic, to publish articles in support of voluntary family limitation and to provide readers with space in which to express their opinions on the issue, both pro and con.

Extent of Periodical Coverage

Popular American magazines increased their coverage of the issue of birth control gradually though not consistently throughout the twentieth century. In the period 1915 through 1919, there were 47 articles indexed in the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* under the heading of "Birth Control." Practically all of these were contained in journals of opinion and 38 appeared prior to World War I. A decline of interest occurred during the war and immediately afterwards. Only 23 articles were listed from 1920 through 1924. Interest increased in the late twenties (1925-1929: 45 articles). An even more significant rise occurred during the early 1930s when 131 articles were listed from 1930 to 1934. Coverage declined somewhat in the late thirties (1935-1939: 94 articles) and continued to decline sharply after the outbreak of World War II until the 1950s (1940-1944: 51 articles; 1945-1949: 34 articles; 1950-1954: 49 articles; 1955-1959:

107 articles). During the 1960s interest in the subject of birth control rose phenomenally. By the end of 1968, 774 articles had been listed under either "Birth Control" or "Contraception," a subject heading added to the *Readers' Guide* in 1951 (1960-1964: 316 articles; 1965-1968: 458 articles).

Examples of Coverage

A brief examination of some of the magazines which have given coverage to the issue of birth control since 1915 reinforces the view that it was the journals of opinion that worked to mold new attitudes toward birth control and that the extent of coverage of the subject is indicative of public interest in it. Such an examination also reveals something of the nature of the debate over birth control as it developed in the twentieth century.

1915-1919

Three periodicals accounted for the bulk of the articles on birth control which appeared in the 1915-1919 period: *Harper's Weekly*, the *New Republic*, and *Survey*.

Harper's Weekly was one of the first American periodicals to give extensive coverage to the growing debate over birth control, running an eight-article series from April to October in 1915. In doing so, it was placed in danger of being suppressed by the federal government for breaking the Obscenity Law of 1873 which forbade the publication of any kind of information pertaining to the prevention of conception. No wonder so many periodicals avoided the subject in the first half of the twentieth century! Its standing with the readers also was endangered. Perhaps the editors felt daring in a resperate kind of way; 1915 proved to be the last full year of publication for the 59 year-old weekly. In 1916 it was absorbed into the *Independent*. For most of its existence *Harper's Weekly* had been considered "a vigorous political journal of conservative tendencies." (Mott, 1938, 486) New editors tried to inject a new vitality into the ailing journal, but in so doing "drove the dear old paper down the hill."

Perhaps even more representative of the

kind of journal of opinion which dared to give coverage to an unpopular issue in this period was the *New Republic*. Publication began in 1914 under the editorship of Herbert Croly and with the consistent financial support of Willard and Dorothy Straight. The subtitle of the periodical was "Journal of Opinion." Editor Croly once said that the object of the *New Republic* was "less to inform and entertain its readers than to start little insurrections in the realm of their convictions." (Mott, 1958, 203) The magazine took up support of birth control as a desirable social reform and continued to give it consistent succor throughout the twentieth century.

Survey published many letters from readers expressing either their support or sometimes vehement objections to birth control. Like *Harper's Weekly* and *New Republic*, it attempted to influence rather than merely reflect social attitudes. Labeled "A Journal of Social Exploration," it appealed primarily to the reader interested in the social problems of the time. In spite of a continual battle against financial collapse, it survived until 1952. Until its demise, *Survey* continued to support the birth control movement by opening its pages to the comments of its readers and including full length articles which almost invariably were in favor of the movement.

Thus the fledgling birth control movement attracted at least the more liberal periodicals in its opening years, but as the attention of the American public was drawn more and more to the events in Europe and World War I, interest in domestic social reform waned.

The 1920s

The *New Republic* and the *Nation* continued to keep the issue alive during the prosperous twenties with the former merely upholding a policy it has pursued consistently since its inception. "It is remarkable," *New Republic's* editor-in-chief commented in 1964, "how many of the controversies that engaged the moral concern of the *New Republic* twenty-five or fifty years ago still do." (Luce, 1964, Preface) Perhaps it is not as remarkable as it is indica-

tive of the slow rate at which attitudes change.

The *Nation* had begun publication in 1865 with the purpose, its founders proclaimed, of making "an earnest effort to bring to the discussion of political and social questions a really critical spirit, and to wage war upon the vices of violence, exaggeration, and misrepresentation by which so much of the political writing of this day is marred." (*Nation*, July 20, 1865, 95) Its coverage of a controversial issue like birth control, particularly during periods when other magazines shunned the topic, is evidence of the manner in which its editors have tried to live up to the initial statement of policy. But like other professed journals of opinion, the *Nation* has had to rely primarily upon the financial backing of benevolent and socially concerned individuals willing to allow the editors full control of the periodical.

By the late 1920s, the birth control movement had won a number of victories and was gradually gaining an aura of respectability as a topic for open discussion. But journals of opinion continued to dominate periodical coverage of the issue while magazines which appealed to the masses continued to avoid it. The *Forum* opened its pages in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s to prominent individuals interested in birth control in order to allow full and open discussion of the issue. This was in keeping with its stated purpose of serving as "a non-partisan magazine of free discussion [which] . . . aims to interpret the new America that is attaining consciousness in this decade." The *Forum* attempted to give both sides. "Whatever is attacked by contributors this month," it proclaimed, "may be praised in later issues." In this respect, the *Forum* differed from other journals like *New Republic* which gave consistent support to the birth control movement.

In 1925, *Catholic World* became one of the first Catholic periodicals to carry an item relating specifically to the issue of birth control. The gist of the article was to express opposition to proposals for changing the federal law prohibiting the use of the U.S. mails for disseminating contracep-

tive information and materials. The Church thus entered the debate, and in so doing revealed its recognition of the issue of birth control as one of growing social concern and one with which it would have to deal in the future.

Ironically perhaps, but not surprisingly, the Great Depression of the 1930s which brought so much suffering and anguish to millions of Americans apparently gave the birth control movement a tremendous upsurge in popularity. The increase in periodical coverage, particularly during the early years of the decade, is indicative of the rise in public interest. Families oppressed already by the burden of too many mouths to feed seemed eager for information which could help them avoid any further drain on their meager resources. Coverage of the subject was extended both in numbers of periodicals and in numbers of articles. Many of the more conservative journals devoted room to the issue for the first time, some in an attempt to attract new readers by presenting a topic now considered proper for open discussion but others in an attempt to stop what they now realized was developing into a full-fledged social reform movement.

Journals of opinion which had covered the issue at a time when it was considered too radical for the more reader-conscious periodicals continued to include the topic, and most increased their coverage in the early 1930s. *Commonweal* joined *Catholic World* in opposing birth control with extensive coverage of the issue during the 1930s. *Newsweek* and *Time* became the first of the general weekly news magazines to give the birth control movement specific coverage. The more specialized weekly news magazines, such as *Business Week* which is designed for the American businessman, gave the issue almost no coverage until the 1960s. Birth control provided only limited opportunities for business, and many of these were clandestine, until the age of the Pill.

Prior to the 1930s, American research on methods of birth control was very limited, especially when compared with current endeavors in this area. Even the Amer-

ican Medical Association refused to sanction birth control until 1937. Thereafter, efforts to find effective and acceptable methods of preventing conception increased. The need for transmitting the results of those efforts was taken up by such old and revered science periodicals as the *Scientific American* and *Science* early in the decade. However, it has been *Science News* which has given the most extensive and consistent coverage of birth control research since the late 1930s.

The entrance of the *American Journal of Public Health* into the debate over birth control in 1935 revealed another aspect of the issue which is still very much alive. Should the dispensation of birth control information and devices be part of the public health services provided by the states? The debate in periodicals over this thorny problem has divided, on the whole, along religious lines. Catholics have opposed the use of public funds to support a project prohibited by their faith; non-Catholics have insisted upon the right of the poor to have access to the kind of information and procedures long available to the wealthier classes. The Birth Control Federation of America was formed in 1937 for the purpose of integrating "birth control into the public-health programs of every state in the United States." (*Newsweek*, February 5, 1940, 29) Such programs prompted *Life Magazine* to publish its first article dealing specifically with birth control in 1940. (*Life*, May 6, 67) It reported on the public health program in South Carolina, quoted many statistics indicating a desperate need for birth control clinics in the state, and lauded state officials for having the courage to use public funds to bring birth control information to indigent mothers for the first time.

Fortune, a magazine which grew out of the crowded business section of *Time* in 1930, carried an extensive article in 1938 in an obvious attempt to awaken in the business community a feeling of social responsibility in the marketing of birth control products. "This strange, half-lighted world is not one that a lay magazine enters casually," exclaimed the editors in an in-

troductory statement to the article. "Considered purely as a social problem or even as a medical problem, birth control is not a subject suited to the pages of *Fortune*." But the birth control industry, "a peculiar industry, half legitimate, half bootleg, prosperous, and growing," needs publicizing and control. (*Fortune*, February, 1938, 83) Contraceptives had become a lucrative business, but too many companies were taking advantage of the lack of governmental control and were selling products which could prove detrimental to health. "Millions of women have been duped and thousands of secret tragedies have been enacted," *Fortune* proclaimed. If business will not supervise itself, then the government should regulate at least those aspects of the trade which could cause injury. A leading business magazine thus pointed the way on an issue still not completely resolved.

To Date

During the depression decade, several Protestant groups and the American Medical Association sanctioned birth control, the federal law on the dissemination of contraceptive information was altered primarily through judicial interpretation, progress was made in contraceptive research, business practices in the production and marketing of birth control products came under public scrutiny, and public funds were used for the first time in promoting the use of birth control by public health agencies. The Catholic-Protestant debate over the issue still raged, but even among Catholics a split was discernible. Nevertheless, interest in birth control dropped significantly during World War II and remained low during the postwar period. By the late 1950s, however, the postwar baby boom began to pose problems for all levels of governmental agencies. Coupled with a more enlightened attitude toward sexual relations in general, the new population pressures apparently stimulated interest in the birth control issue. Periodical coverage rose significantly; for example, in 1955 only three articles were listed under the heading of "Birth Control" in

the *Readers' Guide*; in 1960, there were 47 and in 1965, 118. Periodicals giving particularly heavy coverage to the issue in the 1960s have been, not surprisingly, religious journals like the Catholic magazines, *America*, *Commonweal*, and *Catholic World*, and Protestant publications, such as *Christian Century*. Journals of opinion, such as the *New Republic*, have continued to give unwavering support, and science magazines have found it necessary to increase their coverage many times over in an attempt to keep up with contraceptive research.

Conclusion

The kinds and numbers of magazines which have given or have not given coverage to an important social issue like birth control in the twentieth century support Peterson's contention that some journals dare to challenge prevailing public opinion in an attempt to influence it while others merely reflect social attitudes. Further, the extent of coverage given to the subject of birth control by American periodicals indicates that public interest in the topic has fluctuated over the years. This is, of course, based on the assumption that commercial magazines reflect public interest in a subject. After apparently being an offensive issue to the general public in the early twentieth century, in that magazines, on the whole, avoided the subject assiduously, birth control became a topic of interest in the 1930s when there was a significant increase in both the kinds of magazines and number of articles devoted to the subject. Interest declined during World War II just as it had during World War I, but since the 1940s, coverage of the topic has increased significantly, perhaps due at least in part to concern over population pressures and adoption of newly developed methods of birth control. Interest may decline again as it has in the past, but it is doubtful that the subject will ever again be the socially taboo issue that it was in the early decades of the twentieth century.

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Educating the Black Male at Various Class Levels for Marital Roles*

ROBERT E. STAPLES**

This paper explores the necessity and feasibility of preparing the Black male at various class levels to take on the marital roles of husband and father and offers some observations about what the author considers the most pragmatic approach to the problem.—The Editor

The purpose of this paper is to explore the necessity and feasibility of preparing the Black male, at various class levels, to take on the marital roles of husband and father. In doing this class distinctions should be emphasized, as they affect the nature of any premarital educational program devised to deal with this problem. The concept of social class, when distinguished from cultural factors, dictates two levels of analysis by the family sociologist, separating that social phenomena associated with the group's position in the class hierarchy from those factors relevant to conditions germane to racial or cultural affiliation.

Not only is premarital preparation essential for Afro-American youth, but for youth in general. There is a definite lack of continuity in American society between adolescence and adulthood as many American males go from the family of orientation to the family of procreation without adequate

supportive bridges from the society. However, while this problem may be extant for all youth, the endemic nature of the Afro-American's life in American society lends a greater degree of urgency to helping him meet the requirements of his future marital roles. In assessing the need for premarital preparation of Black males, one only has to refer to the various research studies on the Afro-American family in order to identify the problems besieging this subcultural group. It should be noted, however, that the Black male is neglected from a research point of view simply because he is more difficult to reach than women, youths, and children.

Due to the realization of the importance of the race problem in this country, the family life of Afro-Americans has been studied more intensely than that of any other racial or nationality group in the society. However, it is still a fact that the Black family remains more a talked about than a studied phenomenon, and more a researched than an assisted group. Moreover, many of these research studies are replete with oversimplifications of popular stereotypes, oversimplifications which sta-

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