Save the Mothers? Representations of Pregnancy in the 1930s

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Pregnancy is, to borrow a phrase from Elizabeth Grosz, a 'production of nature'.[1] In other words, it is not simply a material fact which can be objectively and scientifically known, but a process which has been differently viewed and interpreted in different historical and cultural contexts. In this paper, I want to explore a particular shift in emphasis which took place in Britain in the 1930s in terms of the understanding (or 'production') of pregnancy. This shift was from an emphasis on the health of the mother to an emphasis on the health of the foetus, a shift which had complex causes and implications.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century feminists and others had campaigned energetically for a national system of care for women during pregnancy and childbirth. Before the First World War, there was virtually no state provision for maternal and infant care. Pressure from organizations such as the Women's Co-operative Guild led to the inclusion of thirty shillings maternity benefit for the wives of insured men in Lloyd George's National Insurance Act (1911), and in 1913 this benefit was accepted as legally the property of the mother. However, this could do little to alleviate the underlying issues (for many women) of long-standing poverty, overwork and inadequate medical care. *Maternity*, a book of 'letters from working women' edited by Margaret Llewelyn Davies and published in 1915, drew effective attention to these issues. The letters came in response to an appeal from Llewelyn Davies for evidence of the difficult conditions of pregnancy for poorer women. Recurrent themes in them are the adverse effects of poor nutrition and the strain of bearing children while also working outside the home. One woman writes, for example:

> When my second baby came, I did not know how I was going to keep it. When the last one came, I had to do my own washing and baking before the week-end. Before three weeks, I had to go out working, washing, and cleaning, and so lost my milk and began with the bottle . . . I was a particularly strong woman when I married. There is not much strength left.[2]

Another gives an example of the widespread indifference of general practitioners to maternity cases:

> I might say that I have had two children. The first one was still-born, but it was owing to the doctor not paying proper attention to me, as, when he came, he said he would not be needed until the morning after. However, I got to be worse, and he was fetched again, but refused to come, so we had to get a midwife, and she said if I had had proper attention the child would have been born then. Consequently, the child was suffocated in the birth. When all was over, my husband went to tell him, and he said he was very glad, as he wanted his rest. (pp. 66–7)

By definition, the women who contributed to Llewelyn Davies's book were the survivors, but it was those who died in pregnancy and childbirth who became the focus of concern of government in the 1920s, for such deaths were by then defined as *avoidable*. Where previously such deaths had been viewed as an inevitable by-product of pregnancy, they were now seen as the result, in part, of inadequate medical care. In 1924 Janet Campbell, Senior Medical Officer in the Ministry of Health, wrote the first Government Report devoted specifically to maternal mortality. She singled out five likely causes of maternal mortality: (a) the quality of professional attendance in pregnancy; (b) abortion and miscarriage leading to sepsis; (c) rickets and associated contracting of the pelvis; (d) the employment of women and (e) general sanitation and housing. It is important to note that all these factors could, theoretically, be alleviated by means of social policy initiatives.[3]

However, despite the passing of the 1918 Maternity and Child Welfare Act (which enabled municipal authorities to aid the funding of maternity and child welfare work), and despite the commissioning of reports like that by Janet Campbell, maternal mortality actually rose between 1918 and 1932.[4] This makes it all the more surprising that around 1930 attention began to shift away from the health of the mother towards the health of the foetus.[5] E. Sylvia Pankhurst's book *Save the Mothers*, published in 1930, partly exemplifies this shift and also gives some clues as to its causes. As the title suggests, Pankhurst's book is primarily concerned with 'the heavy loss of mothers in childbirth today' and it draws attention to the same issues as Llewelyn Davies's *Maternity*, particularly in relation to poorer mothers: poverty, overwork, medical indifference. Pankhurst's vision is radical: she argues for a national maternity service and for wages for mothers during pregnancy and for one year after childbirth. The argument is supported by statistical appendices, showing the

comparative rates of maternal mortality in countries with varying systems of economic support for mothers. In many respects, Pankhurst's book is enlightened and forward-thinking. There is nonetheless a disquieting note in her descriptions of the suffering of the poor. These are emotive and impressionistic, with no reference to interviews or sources. Pankhurst relies on memories of her own war-time work in the East End to produce descriptions like this in her chapter on 'The Mother's Case':

> A wan-faced mother in a dismal tenement gazed at her puny babe with ineffable tenderness, stroking its fleshless limbs and tiny, claw-like hands. "They are like poor little birds and they are not wanted," she said, and clasped it close in an impulse of pitying love.[6]

Despite Pankhurst's recognition of the 'ineffable' love of this mother for her child, the comparison of the baby to a bird, the emphasis on its 'puny' weakness and the ambiguous statement that it is 'not wanted' (which might mean not only that it is not desired but that it is not *needed*) suggest a curious ambivalence towards the children of the poor. One of the letters quoted in the book also sounds a discordant note. 'An East End Mother' writes:

> As a healthy nation is the ideal, it should be accepted as a national charge at this stage of civilisation to care for the mothers and babies. It is a *national responsibility* and *the most important thing in the world*. *Healthy minds in healthy bodies* will make for the highest point of *Happiness and Efficiency*. (p. 193)

What seems to be surfacing here (and at various other points in the book) is the discourse of eugenics, a discourse which had previously been invoked by Pankhurst in connection with the birth of her son. Pankhurst had been anxious to have a child ever since her recovery from health problems associated with the suffrage campaign, and was delighted when her son Richard was born in December 1927. However, her refusal to marry (both she and the child's father, Silvio Corio, advocated 'free love') led to a final and painful break with her mother Emmeline Pankhurst. The relationship between mother and daughter had long been a difficult one, but Sylvia's 'disgraced' status as an unmarried mother proved the final blow for the ageing Mrs Pankhurst, who severed all ties with her errant daughter. Sylvia's biographer, Patricia Romero, believes that it was in order to hit back at her mother that Sylvia approached the *News of the World* with the story of her 'eugenic baby'.[7] The paper ran the story on the front page of the edition of 8th April 1928 under the heading '"Eugenic" Baby Sensation. Sylvia Pankhurst's Amazing Confession'. In her 'confession', Pankhurst explained her reasons for having a child using standard eugenic terminology: "I wanted a baby, as every complete human being desires parenthood, to love him and cherish him, to see

him grow and develop and to leave behind me a being who will, I hope, carry on the best that is in me and in my stock." The article continues:

> Miss Pankhurst then proceeded to discuss eugenics. "You ask if my baby boy is eugenic," she said. "It is good eugenics, I believe, if one desires parenthood, to consider if one is of sufficient general intelligence, bodily health and strength, and freedom from hereditary diseases to produce **AN INTELLIGENT AND HEALTHY CHILD.** (sic) I believe that of myself. I believe that, also, of my baby's father. Indeed, I consider my 'husband' has many gifts with which to endow our child."[8]

Like Marie Stopes (also an enthusiastic eugenicist), Pankhurst was a radical who held some deeply reactionary views. This ambivalence can be seen in *Save the Mothers*, the argument of which is framed through competing – and contradictory – discourses. The dominant discourse is that of social policy, with a clear indication of all the benefits to be reaped, for mother and child, through public health initiatives. However, there is also a counter-discourse, coming from eugenic thought, which implies that as well as saving mothers, the state might wish to prioritise those most fit to contribute to the nation's 'stock'.

Eugenic thought in Britain had its origins in the work of Francis Galton, a cousin (appropriately enough) of Charles Darwin, who developed his theory of the inheritance of superior mental qualities after reading *The Origin of Species*. Galton argued that heredity would ensure that like would breed like and implied that social classes thus corresponded to biological sub-types. The Malthusian question, for him, was of the relative breeding rates of the different classes. In a 'Presidential Address' to the International Congress of Hygiene and Demography he asked:

> Are the natural gifts of the most productive class, bodily, intellectually and moral, above or below the line of national mediocrity? If above that line, then the existing conditions are favourable to the improvement of the race. If they are below that line, *they must work towards its degradation*.[9]

The Eugenics Education Society, founded in 1907, shared ideals with a network of other societies concerned with improving the lives of the poor but its distinguishing feature was the view, derived from Galton, that pauperism was biological, resulting from inherited defects rather than from social and environmental conditions. This view determined the direction of the research carried out by the Society, which focused in particular on so-called 'pauper pedigree studies'. These involved the collection of family histories and their reduction to diagrams which could be used to demonstrate the heritability of particular characteristics. Pedigree studies were particularly valuable to the Eugenics Society because they presupposed no particular theory of heredity (Mendelian, for example) but made the visible facts of heredity easy to grasp.

More controversial were the Society's interpretations of these facts. In a 1910 report of the Society's Committee on Poor Law Reform, for example, in a commentary on a six-generation pedigree study, it is argued, first that one pauper family has a tendency to marry into other pauper families, secondly that successive generations of the same family contain a due proportion of paupers, and thirdly that:

> the Committee is quite clear that the paupers whom they have seen and examined individually are characterized by some obvious vice or defect such as drunkenness, theft, persistent laziness, a tubercular diathesis, mental deficiency, deliberate moral obliquity or general weakness of character, manifested by want of initiative or energy or stamina and an inclination to attribute this misfortune to their own too great goodness and generally to bad luck.[10]

Such views eventually filtered through into some policy initiatives (for example, the award of grants to birth-control organisations in 1936–7), and the Society continued to advocate both negative (for the poor) and positive (for the gifted) eugenics during the 1930s. Dorothy Sayers's inclusion of a eugenicist enthusiast in her 1935 novel *Gaudy Night* suggests the extent to which these debates had by this time become part of popular consciousness. Miss Schuster-Slatt is a comic character whose work is on 'the sterilisation of the unfit, and the encouragement of matrimony among the intelligentsia': her views are implicitly endorsed by a novel which ends with the engagement of the superlatively intelligent Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane.[11] There was, however, considerable opposition to eugenicist thought in this period, both from writers such as Aldous Huxley and from scientists on the left, in particular J. B. S. Haldane. Haldane was outspoken in his opposition to the assumptions and methods of the eugenicists. In a radio talk broadcast in 1929 he argued that 'we do not know in most cases, how far social failure and success are due to heredity and how far to environment. And environment is the easiest of the two to improve'.[12] He attacked proposals to sterilise the 'feeble-minded' children of the poor on both practical and ethical grounds, arguing that the seeming frequency of such children among the poorer classes was not a sign of the *innately* low intelligence of this class but of their inability to subsidise (and hide away) a non-earning family member. Increasingly, he came to believe that environment played a far greater part in human development than genetics, and put the moral case for what was effectively a welfare state in order to eradicate or at least lessen class differences.[13]

In these debates of the twenties and thirties, the question of the relative importance of heredity and environment was being played out across the body of the pregnant woman. With the focus of medical interest moving towards foetal rather than maternal health, it was the viability of the foetus (in the broadest sense) which was becoming a crucial – and political – question in

the thirties. I want to argue that these issues form the sub-text of Enid Bagnold's popular novel *The Squire*, published in 1938 and serialised in the same year in *Good Housekeeping* in Britain and the *Ladies Home Journal* in the United States. Like *Save the Mothers*, this is a text which is in many respects radical and enlightened. It was pioneering in its detailed descriptions of the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth: while this repelled male readers such as H. G. Wells, the book was welcomed by many women readers for whom there was very little information to allay their fears and anxieties about pregnancy.[14] Almost the only available handbook for pregnant women at this time was Dr Grantly Dick Read's *Natural Childbirth* (1933).[15] While there is no direct evidence that Bagnold had read this book, there are significant parallels between key passages in the two texts. We might compare, for example, Read on the second stage of labour, and then Bagnold. Here is Read's clinical account:

> During the second stage of labour the mind passes into a state which may be described as fundamentally earnest. Nothing matters, nothing exists for the woman but the fact of childbirth. Her sensibility is lowered; her receptivity is dulled; experience shows that the retentive power of her mind is lessened. Her emotional state is a reproduction, to a very large extent, of the influences about her during the first stage, and if peace and quiet have been dominant features, then the second stage will be conducted with a grim yet almost painless deliberation. (p. 114)

More poetically, Bagnold writes:

> She was not unconscious but she had left external life. She was blind and deaf to world surface. Every sense she had was down in Earth to which she belonged, fighting to maintain a hold on the pain, to keep pace with it, not to take an ounce of will from her assent to its passage . . . She was not in torture, she was in labour; she had been thus before and knew her way.[16]

Both writers are keen to stress that the pain of labour is bearable (Bagnold describes it as 'a flame which doesn't burn you'), and both soothingly liken the bodily movements of pregnancy and childbirth to the movements of the sea of life. Nonetheless, there is one important difference between them. One of Read's principal arguments is that pregnancy and childbirth are not inherently burdensome or painful. He distinguishes between primitive women, defined as those 'whose mental development has not attained a state of civilisation', and cultured women who have for centuries been imbued with fear and told that 'labour entails peril and agony'. For Read, 'racial experience' impacts on the experience of pregnancy and childbirth, and it is the 'primitive' approach which he favours. He argues that Nature (sic) never intended pregnancy to be an illness, and describes the primitive woman continuing her work during pregnancy, so that 'the child develops while she herself

lives a full and natural existence . . . the child then is born – small, hard and easily' (p. 23). For Bagnold, however, it was class rather than race which was the most significant factor in determining a healthy pregnancy and outcome, and here her fiction reflects the characteristic emphasis of British eugenicist thought. The preoccupation with biologically defined social class was a peculiarly British phenomenon: for the eugenics movement in the United States it was the criminal and feeble-minded who were the principal cause of concern, while in Germany the focus was on those defined as psychotics or psychopaths.[17]

Bagnold's novel describes the experiences of an upper-middle-class woman living in conditions of extreme comfort and security. While the rather surprising title of the novel might suggest an element of critique of the existing social order, none is forthcoming. The title simply points to the power of the central character, who is in all important senses the controller – squire – of the house serviced by her wealthy and often-absent husband. The rightness of the social order which supports her life is taken for granted: the only flaw within it is that hardy perennial in women's writing of the period, the 'servant problem'. The squire has problems in retaining domestic staff and becomes despondent whenever a staffing difficulty arises, particularly in the period covered by the novel when she is about to give birth. However, there is no consideration in the novel of the *causes* of the 'servant problem'. Rather, the squire expresses unabashed (and unreflective) contempt for her servants, particularly the 'temporaries':

> They went from situation to situation with slovenly adaptability, shedding disruption about the house, Pied Piper whistling to its rats, a come-up- and-follow-me which got into the blood of the 'unders', slackening discipline. (pp. 72–3)

Servants are not only described metaphorically as animals (rats or birds) but are also associated with physical defect. One applicant for the post of cook peers 'over the pale trunk of an immense goitre' – only to be characterised by the squire as 'a born lavatory attendant if ever there was one'. Another servant girl is dismissed (literally and metaphorically) as a 'half-baked' and 'useless human being'. The implication is that as a class servants are defective and/or underdeveloped, and that they cannot be taught or helped. In relation to the 'half-baked' girl who has stolen trinkets, for example, the squire reflects that 'the seed of that ludicrous suitcase lay deeper than the present. The poor little magpie had got her picking fingers from the past . . . One couldn't waste time reclaiming land that had no banks to keep the sea out' (pp. 224–5).

If the servant class is biologically determined as inferior, a question mark must hang over their suitability for reproduction. Significantly, none of the servants in the novel has children: they see their role, rather, as to serve the

fecund squire who is about to give birth to her fifth child. Their own lives are entirely subsumed in her service, to the extent that the nursery governess is 'transfigured' by the news that labour is about to start, with 'happy excitement . . . flying in her face'. The suggestion is that this is how things should be, with the sterile and 'half-baked' serving the strong and productive. The squire's fitness for reproduction is never in doubt. On the contrary, it is underscored through the midwife's thoughts as she approaches the squire's house:

> They were old hands, she and the squire. This was the fifth time they had worked together. She knew the squire had laid her ground well and was in fine condition, brown as a light loaf from head to foot, and strong . . . She had no need in this case for her resolutions and her armour. The squire could be disciplined and good. (p. 112)

The reference to the midwife's 'armour' is noteworthy. She is described elsewhere as 'a Religious and a crusador', engaged, so to speak, in a holy war for the production of healthy babies. In her conversations with the squire, she not only privileges some mothers over others but also advocates the establishment of maternity clinics, places of training for pregnant women to enable them to maximise their reproductive health and potential:

> My clinic would be a palisaded place, far in the country. There the mother should travel beforehand, passing through the isolation of a journey, leaving husband and family with their pre-occupations in the world. There, in a camp, like an athlete in training she should do her work for the newborn out of sight of life. No legends, no nonsense. The highest medical efficiency. Pre-natal observations carried out . . . (p. 121, Bagnold's ellipsis)

In this utopian vision, endorsed by the squire, once mothers had been selected and isolated, the foetus would be watched over and worked on. The reference to pre-natal observation suggests the kind of medical intervention at the foetal stage which is still controversial today.

If we make the connection here with Huxley's dystopian *Brave New World* (1932), with its attack on controlled reproduction, the darker strands in Bagnold's novel are thrown into clearer relief. Far from being an unqualified celebration of pregnancy and motherhood, *The Squire* reflects and endorses a eugenic approach to maternity which has connections with the rise of Fascism. While the links between eugenics and Fascism are complex and vary from context to context, it is possible to be fairly specific about the link in Bagnold's case. She had become increasingly sympathetic towards Hitler in the 1930s, visiting Germany in 1933 to see the changes then taking place and becoming particularly friendly in 1936 with a pro-Hitler German envoy to Britain, Joachim von Ribbentrop. Significantly, in some unpublished notes written at the time when she was drafting *The Squire* Bagnold explicitly connected the political changes in Germany with birth and human progress. She wrote:

> We are afraid of Hitlerism. We see in it retrogression. I see in Nazism birth and all the horrors and beauties in birth . . . A curious inverted situation has arisen. The intellectuals, who should be the first to spot a birth, in this case watch it with horror. Their horror is natural. The birth has become clouded in brutality. It does not even run in blood, like a revolution, but exists with the narrowness, the restriction, the obstinate totalitarianism frowning weight of the ruler of an armed camp. . . . But they have missed a birth![18]

In November 1938, Bagnold published an article in the *Sunday Times* entitled 'In Germany Today – Hitler's New Form of Democracy' in which she celebrated the 'vigour and expectancy' which she had seen on the faces of the German people on a recent visit. (18) In the same article, she argued that 'we' would have to accept the persecutions in Germany – apparently meaning that they were a price which had to be paid to ensure political stability in Europe. In a letter to a friend at the same time she praised Hitler for having evolved 'a better political and efficiency machine to cope with life'.[19]

The keyword here is efficiency, which echoes the midwife's emphasis on efficiency in *The Squire*, and that of the 'East End Mother' in *Save the Mothers*. Efficiency demands the selection of the most productive and the shedding of the ineffectual. In this context, it is not difficult to see the link between Bagnold's eugenic meliorism (romantic, upper-class, specifically British in its class emphasis as it was) and Hitler's more ambitious programmes of social 'reform'. It was left to Violet Bonham-Carter to put the alternative view to Bagnold. In a letter to her friend after the publication of the *Sunday Times* article Bonham-Carter wrote:

> What surprised me was that you could write with such irresponsible lightness, almost gaiety, of a situation undermined with human tragedy and horror . . . Did you imagine anything when last week you read about the expulsion of 20,000 Polish Jews . . . All boys over twelve were torn from their mothers and shipped off alone . . . This is the background of the "Jones week in a country town". [Jones was Bagnold's married name][20]

There were other public attacks, from Ethel Smythe among others, but Bagnold did not recant, nor, according to her biographer, did she ever show guilt or remorse over the pro-German views which, as Bonham-Carter points out, cast an odd light on her commitment to the creativity of motherhood.

To return to my opening point, I would suggest that the shift in medical emphasis during the 1930s from maternal to foetal health was connected with the increasing prominence of eugenic discourse at this time. The belief that social class was biologically determined led many to advocate the monitoring and control of reproduction as the most effective means of improving the health and efficiency of the nation. It was not until after the Second World War, with the reconstruction of the welfare system and the disappearance of the pauper class as an administrative category, that the class-based British

eugenic project came to an end. Post-war reconstruction was based on the view that class differentials could be eradicated through social and economic intervention: in that brief period of optimism it was thought that class distinctions in terms of life chances would rapidly become things of the past.

Notes

1 E. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994), p. 18.

2 M. Llewelyn Davies (ed.), *Maternity: Letters from Working Women* (London, 1978), pp. 110–11. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

3 See A. Oakley, *The Captured Womb: A History of the Medical Care of Pregnant Women* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 63–5 for a detailed analysis of the 1924 Maternal Mortality Report.

4 At the end of the First World War in 1918, one mother died for every 264 babies born alive. By 1932 this figure had risen to one maternal death for every 238 live births. See Oakley, *The Captured Womb*, Appendix 1, p. 298 for a graph showing maternal mortality rates in England and Wales 1847–1982 (figures derived from the civil registration of births and deaths).

5 This shift is documented in Oakley, *The Captured Womb*, ch. 4 and in E. Shorter, *A History of Women's Bodies* (Harmondsworth, 1984), pp. 164–7.

6 S. Pankhurst, *Save the Mothers* (London, 1930), p. 33. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

7 See P. Romero, *E. Sylvia Pankhurst: Portrait of a Radical* (New Haven and London, 1990), p. 168.

8 *News of the World*, 8 April 1928, p. 1.

9 Quoted in P. Mazumdar, *Eugenics, Human Genetics and Human Failings* (London, 1992), p. 40, (my emphasis).

10 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

11 D. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London, 1935), p. 24.

12 Quoted in Mazumdar, *Eugenics*, p. 179.

13 See Mazumdar, *Eugenics*, pp. 182–5 for a detailed discussion of Haldane's views.

14 Wells gave his reaction to the book in a letter to Bagnold, saying that it made him feel 'I'd been attacked by a multitude of many-breasted women (like Diana of Ephesus) and thrown into a washing basket full of used nursery napkins'. Quoted in A. Sebba, *Enid Bagnold: The Authorized Biography* (London, 1986), p. 137.

15 G. Dick Read, *Natural Childbirth* (London, 1933). All quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers are given in brackets.

16 E. Bagnold, *The Squire* (1938) (London, 1987), pp. 145–46. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

17 Mazumdar points out that in the United States, 'the undesirables with the high birth rate who provided the source of feeble-mindedness and crime, and who filled up the asylums and the prisons, were the immigrants from Southern Europe' (*Eugenics*, p. 4). For a detailed account of eugenic policies in the United States and in Germany in this period see S. Kuhl, *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* (Oxford, 1994).

18 Quoted in Sebba, *Enid Bagnold*, p. 138.

19 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 139.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

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