

Are Women Full Citizens?: The Abortion Debate, and the “Gifts” of Life and Poverty

by Elizabeth Gregory

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Abstract:

This essay explores fertility’s impact on economics and the gendered relations of power among humans in patriarchy. By definition, patriarchs rule through fertility—their status depends upon the exclusion of women from policymaking by means of childbearing. When forced to bear and rear early, women receive limited education and have neither skills nor time to object. The availability of birth control and abortion transforms this situation. This essay argues that anti-reproductive-choice arguments based on the premise that an unborn potential child has received an individual “gift of life” which it is the mother’s duty to host occlude the way that the arrival at maturity of human lives depends on the ongoing gift of parents’ (principally mothers’) time and energy. When this “gift” is coerced, it blocks the innovative participation and skills development of huge portions of the population.

Keywords: abortion, gifts, poverty, life, citizenship, childbearing

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Humans exist in network, interdepending mutually, parts of a social and physical ecology in which what one does affects what others may or may not do. Humans depend upon the circulation of what may be called *gifts* from the earth, which provide physical sustenance, and from the cultures in which they are raised, which provide them with language and the storehouse of human technology and skills. Caregivers provide young humans with time, nourishment, and knowledge that are essential to their development and which may also be viewed as gifts (the term *caregiver* implies it). Adults and children both receive framework gifts from their cultures, including shared narratives (providing a sense of meaning and direction), and infrastructure (like roads and market systems). All humans then support others with ongoing cultural gifts of knowledge, technology and materials that pass through them and circulate back to others. All gifts are embedded in social and physical contexts, never the independent contribution of one individual to another.

In many modern capitalist patriarchies (Young), however, with the US foremost among these, humans mythologize themselves as self-reliant individuals. Though individuals matter, the exclusively individualist view informs and distorts the contemporary abortion debate, the determination of which will itself play a defining role in the organization of American society going forward.

The US abortion debate is usually presented in terms of individual *rights*: either the individual right to life of the unborn potential person or the individual right to control her own body of the person who is a potential mother. But, since children cannot survive on their own, requiring enormous care for at least the first six and arguably the first eighteen years, the “right to life” is essentially a right to expect gifts from caregivers, which in the US today generally means the mother. Those “gifts” then have further ripple effects across society.

Women (long themselves gifts exchanged among men [Hyde, Rubin]) get status on the anti-abortion side of the debate only as natural resources required to provide the unborn with the “gift” of life through conception and physical nurturing, not as citizens with rights to determine how to distribute their gifts. The pro-life camp considers an embryo a person with rights outweighing the mother's to decide whether to bear. The pro-choice camp considers that a fetus becomes a person when it is born, and that the mother's rights as a citizen trump the right of others to impose continuing pregnancy upon her. 90% of abortions occur within the first trimester and 99% within the first two trimesters (with most of the remaining 1% due to health issues) (Guttmacher). Though the option to adopt out children a family cannot support is often stressed by anti-choice activists (cf. Mike Huckabee's [video *The Gift of Life*](#)), most women who bear children feel bound to care for them once they arrive, by custom, sense of connection, or fear of putting the child at risk, even if they can't afford to.

Though this debate is invoked endlessly in the press, it rarely focuses on the effect that access to abortion or the lack thereof has on society as a whole. But such context is needed to

recognize how fertility (“the gift of life”) directly impacts the lives of the families involved, the operation of the economy and the gendered relations of power among humans in patriarchy.

The camp that seeks to outlaw abortion (including groups like the [National Right to Life Committee](#), [The Pro-Life Action League](#), etc.), and that often also aims to restrict access to birth control, views conception as a gift (often as the gift of a god), a gift that should not be rescinded—at least not by the women to whom it seeks to deny that option. This “gift” is valued per se, without regard to whether or not the child will arrive into a situation in which it can thrive, or to the effect on others of the birth, including society, the mother, or the family.

Anti-abortion advocates hold that the outcome of a birth is unpredictable and that, once conceived, each life should be afforded a chance to thrive in the world, to take the chance that, with luck and its own efforts, it will do well—again without regard to requirement for care or for the effects of the care of that life on others or on society. Though it is often framed as giving each fetus a chance for success as a person, such chance also includes chance of failure, as is experienced by the many in our society who live in misery. And it assumes that the woman in whose body the life develops will provide the necessary nurturance, effectively hosting that life through birth and then caring for it for years to come, in a system that offers her minimal support for doing so and often punishes her and the child as well.

As long as people with funds can go to another state, abortion restriction overwhelmingly affects the poor. When and if abortion access becomes less widely available (as is the goal of the conservative right), women of all classes will be affected. Two of the major effects of the denial of abortion and birth control are thus the creation of more poor people (male and female) and the exclusion of women from the polity. Neither of these effects works well as a political position statement, so they generally go unstated by proponents. But since they are among the principal effects, they must be viewed as *goals* of this position. This understanding is supported by the fact that it’s generally representatives of patriarchal religions (male and female) who argue against access to abortion and birth control and who seek to limit women’s decision-making processes.

The pro-choice camp on the other hand (see for instance the [Guttmacher Institute](#) and [Naral Pro-Choice America](#)) views conception as the opening of the *possibility* for a life, the realization of which depends on the participation of the mother, both in bringing the fetus to term, and then in providing for the child for years to come. This position, currently US law, offers a woman the option to choose to continue a pregnancy or to abort it before it comes to term if she judges that it is not a good idea for the potential child and/or for the others who would be involved in rearing it. This view assumes a pregnant woman can responsibly make this decision. Though it is not often stated directly, this view also assumes that trusting women to make these decisions is in the best interest of their families as a whole and society overall.

Two of the major ripple effects of this approach are decreased poverty for the group overall and increased participation of women in the polity, so those must be viewed as *goals* of this position.

The lack of discussion of the ripple effects for society of offering or denying women the option to choose whether to bear a child occurs because both sides, and the debate overall, have been framed in terms of individual rights. But the broader social effects of such choices provide an important framework for understanding this debate and for determining policy regarding abortion and birth control access. Only in that context are the wider effects of the “gift of life” understandable.

How Babies Affect Politics

As D.W. Winnicott noted years ago, “there is no such thing as a baby—meaning that if you set out to describe a baby, you will find that you are describing *a baby and someone*. A baby cannot exist alone, but is essentially part of a relationship” (88). In making this claim, Winnicott points to the comparatively pre-mature birth of all human babies.

Differently from many other animals, the full physical maturation of humans depends on extended post-natal care—overwhelmingly given by mothers to date. Expelled from the womb at the point when they can breathe and continue to grow in the external world, but before they’re able to walk or care for themselves, human babies only survive the first decade or so of life through a kind of social amniotic fluid—called “love.”

Love binds families, keeping parents vigilant on their children’s behalf. Though it involves lots of work, parents optimally take pleasure in rearing their kids, whether or not they specifically planned them (and for most of history choice was not a big factor in children’s arrival). For ages mothers have shared the gifts of time, attention, knowledge and nourishment, for which they expect no guaranteed return. This occurs both because children have nothing material to exchange and because women have had no other options. Nonetheless, children, especially in satisfactory circumstances, provide their caregivers with the pleasures of connection, as well as the possibility of future pleasurable interactions and future support—a form of investment.

Caregiving operates as a gift (though not all gifts are made willingly), in part from the individual giver but also from the society that creates a context in which this gift is made. Likewise, the gift goes not just to the individual child. It is also a gift to society, which benefits from that child’s later availability to participate as a family member, worker, consumer, and citizen.

The social dynamics of love and care may also have ripple effects that are quite negative for individuals and, arguably, for society. Historically, within patriarchal societies, one of the effects of babies’ requirement of care has been to exclude women from the polity. Evidence from matriarchal societies (see Heide Goettner-Abendroth) makes clear that this is not the only model of human organization, but is the one now naturalized. As the first Queen Elizabeth knew, in Western culture, women’s ability to participate in making policy is linked to their ability to refrain from having children. But most women haven’t had the option QEI did to refrain, because they’ve been pushed into sexual relationships willy-nilly. As Virginia Woolf noted in *A Room of One’s Own* (citing G.M. Trevelyan’s *History of England*), “the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents’ choice was liable to be locked up, beaten and flung about

the room, without any shock being inflicted on public opinion. Marriage was not an affair of personal affection, but of family avarice, particularly in the 'chivalrous' upper classes. . . [It often took place] when they were scarcely out of the nurses' charge" (42).

Forced to bear early, women typically received little education and spent their lives as caregivers and as servants to their male relatives, ready at a moment's notice to provide whatever maintenance work was desired. Without education or earning ability, they were unprepared to make their voices heard in social and business policy, nor did they have the time or the access.. Within capitalism, the unpaid work of mothers in bearing and training workers operates as a coerced "gift" to employers and to capital, providing the large part of the surplus value realized. If business had to pay for production of the skilled workers that mothers produce and train for free, their budget sheets would look very different.

As Leopoldina Fortunati notes in *The Arcane of Reproduction*, "the capitalist male/female relationship is not one of individuals but rather a relation of production, an [unequal] exchange which takes place between women and capital, mediated by men" (33). The demands of childbearing and childrearing have funneled women into lifetimes of servitude to capital and to men, without a say in the policies of the state that structure their relation to both their effective masters. (See also, Hyde, chapter 6: "[w]here men alone may give and receive, where women alone are the gifts, men will be active and women passive.")

Certainly roles and relationships are complex and there are other aspects to the story, including the coercion of men. Gender, along with race and class, has historically been a work-assignment system, directing various members of society toward specific kinds of work and pay scales. Lower-class men have traded off their own submission to the upper classes for dominance over the women in their homes—a dominance that also assists capital since men's sexual intercourse with women (will she, nil she) is necessary to the creation of more workers and increases the rate of production—at least in a context where workers require limited education. (Since it directly affects their physical well-being, women often prefer to pace the rate of births.) As part of the tradeoff for dominance, men have also often sacrificed their own emotional expression and involvement with children.

Women and men within households and classes also may have points of alliance and collaboration (for instance, they often work together for mutual benefit at home or in the public sphere, and men increasingly do housework and support women's access to equal pay [benefitting the whole household]). Gender relationships are now in flux globally, with diverse inflections. Women in many countries now vote and have access to birth control and education. But there is also a lot of pushback to these advances.

In the current family-unfriendly US policy environment, women with access to birth control and abortion (and their partners) are increasingly choosing to have fewer or no children, or to delay them until they are able to afford good care on their own (Gregory). In 2016 the US birthrate reached another [all-time low](#). Given the many difficulties inherent in motherhood as currently structured in the US, some coercion (including social pressure to bear, lack of choice, lack of

elder care, etc.) might seem necessary to convince most women to take those burdens on. But some matriarchal social and economic structures have provided honor and benefits to motherhood that have made it attractive per se (see Heide Goettner-Abendroth 2012), and structures that allow both men and women to participate equally in policy making are possible.

Like babies, women too have been largely defined within relationships—not as full citizens themselves—and are dependent upon those relationships for income and protection. But unlike babies, they need not be. This dependent dynamic was so much taken for granted historically that Karl Marx could claim that the work of reproduction—including bearing and rearing children, doing all the housework, cooking, craftwork, and meeting the sexual demands of the spouse—actually had no value, because it could not be exchanged (Waring, 1-11). In this formulation, mothers (and most women) belonged to and were essentially defined as part of (and servants to) their families, not individuals. Mr. and Mrs. John Smith were one, as the old name-sharing convention indicated, and that one was him.

Before birth control, women's essential contribution of cooperative, skilled workers to the business world could be taken for granted because they were stuck making it. In the twentieth century, as middle-class women workers moved into paid work (joining the lower-class women who had long been there), they all operated in a discriminatory, artificially constrained labor pool (most jobs open to women were linked to what they were doing at home for free — teacher, nurse, cook, sex worker, cleaner) and faced lots of competition (all the other constrained women) within those few trades. So their wages were low. The fact that their jobs were done for free at home contributed to the general view that the work was not worth much. The most valuable gifts were recoded as worthless tasks to ensure they would be provided both consistently and at low cost to business and to men (Hartmann, 6-7; Young, 58).

Change

But a series of techno-social changes have transformed the scene across the past two centuries. Improved farm technology has radically lowered the demand for harvest hands. Improved public health services mean not as many children die in childbirth or infancy, so fewer births are needed to complete families. Adults also live longer, meaning that their careers last longer, so employers need fewer new workers over time. Machines and outsourcing now handle a lot of the home-work that women used to do for free. Living longer and producing fewer children, more women now have time to be educated and to contribute their skills to the workforce talent pool. And since the invention of reliable and effective birth control (including the invention of rubber in the 1840s and the development of hormonal contraceptives in 1960 and after), sexually active humans can control when and if they have children. Collectively these changes have transformed the scene that kept women in political and economic bondage within patriarchy previously. The birth rate among American women fell by half in the nineteenth century (the average woman in 1800 had 7 children, and 3.5 in 1900), and then by almost half again in the twentieth (she had 2.0 in 2000, and 1.84 in 2015) (Haines; NVSS).

These transformations mean that capitalism, which initially intersected with the patriarchal model, no longer does that so neatly. Instead, the availability of longer-lived educated female workers provides business with an expanded talent pool to choose among, along with the additional perspectives of female workers/consumers which themselves introduce possibilities of new markets, new insights, new efficiencies, new product and service innovations, and specific knowledge about the needs of female consumers. And increasingly, the logic of democracy raises questions about the rule of capitalist patriarchy over social structures.

In recent decades, Western women's full participation in most sectors of the work and policy worlds has been blocked by the failure of the government or employers to provide the full-day childcare infrastructure that would allow women to seamlessly combine family and work (there being too few women in policy-making roles to forge the policies that would allow more women to rise into policy making roles, a vicious circle). But employers (perhaps under pressure from female workers and lawmakers) may soon determine it to be more cost effective to pay for the childcare services female workers require than to continue to exclude them from fairly-compensated and fully contributive labor. As men and women both move to more fully combine productive and reproductive (care) work, more voices will be raised for change. At the same time, received understandings of what constitutes work, who can do what, and of business models generally, are shifting fast, as robots and information technology shift the labor and profit paradigms beneath our feet.

However, ranking by gender continues to shape experience globally in ways that coerce the gifts of care from those who have no other options. Sexuality operates all too often as a conduit into abasement and service (not mutual joy), through which women's rights are foregone, as are those of the children they bear, many of whom will be forced into lifelong labor for minimal wages.

The "Gifts" of Poverty and Second-Class Status

Which brings us back to the abortion debate. Among the principal reasons that many question the intentions of anti-abortion campaigners is the frequent overlap of efforts to deny abortion access with simultaneous denial of birth control (as has recently happened in Texas, for instance, where clinics in which more than 97% of the care offered is non-abortion-related, were closed without providing alternative resources for birth control and other health care [Hennessey-Fiske]). Since birth control ensures fewer abortions, abortion prevention cannot be the true cause here. Instead the underlying goals seem to be: punishing women for being sexual (and getting out the vote of those who value such punishment), enforcing the production of more poor people (many already poor women could not afford contraception without assistance, and all women who have children they can't afford may become impoverished, as do their children), and blocking women's access to policy-making roles.

Anti-choice policy expands the population of cheap laborers, by two means. First, poor moms and dads get sidetracked by the need to support their unintended kids, diverted from education and career building into lifetimes in low-wage jobs, often several simultaneously. Each

additional unplanned birth depletes the resources available to older kids and throws the family deeper into poverty. Second, the unplanned babies born into poverty grow up to themselves work for low wages, or to serve the prison industry, often held there by early unplanned births of their own.

Conversely, delay of childbearing provides women and their partners with time to complete their educations, establish at work, and develop their own life plans. If they decide to have children later, they can afford to provide good care. Though hardly the only factor, uncontrolled early fertility plays a big role in contributing to, or locking families into, poverty, given the current lack of family-support infrastructure in the US. While early births often curtail parents' education (impeding their movement into well-paid work, and blocking them from civic participation), delay can be a class elevator. In a context where most Americans say they would prefer to have between 2 and 3 children (Gao), delay in one's teens need not limit a family's total size.

The trend to delay the first birth, or to be childfree, already on the rise, opens the way to new social structures in which men and women participate equally and old work and family patterns are revised. Such structures might include non-coercive work (perhaps as Kathi Weeks suggests (137-39) with a basic income for all and shorter work hours), or humans might imagine other ways of functioning, beyond work. In such societies, I suggest, the goal might be to make humans as a group happy and satisfied, not just the upper class subset who experience their own happiness through a sense of superiority to, and power over, those in an inferior, and less resourced position.

In the abortion debate, the rhetoric of "gifts" naturalizes coerced reproductive/care-giving labor that serves capital as currently constituted. That labor is often discounted as woman's obligation to donate. Such obligation only obtains if women are marked secondary and defined not as citizens but as vessels for producing more bodies, ready for exploitation by capitalism and patriarchy. Denying women control over their fertility results not in gifts to the unborn, but gifts to the wealthy. In addition to unwanted children, the "gifts" that accrue to those who are denied access to abortion and birth control include secondary status for women of all classes and poverty and lack of education for many, male and female.

This model uses lack of access to fertility control to continue the current global pattern of exploitation of billions. Not only is such a model undemocratic and unequitable, it is inefficient since it blocks the innovative participation and skills development of huge portions of the population.

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