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USA

Non-natalism

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Pronatalism—the ideology that birth rates are too low and must be raised by implementing policies that get people to have children—has been having a cultural moment in the United States.

After decades of a US total fertility rate that was anomalously high compared to peer countries in Europe and East Asia, it finally began to fall in earnest in 2008 and has continued to do so year on year ever since (with the exception of a small rebound after the initial stages of the Covid pandemic). This continued decline has led to more panic every year about the state of American births, and to the rise of a cultural movement of “Natalists”—an alliance of right-wing racists, misogynists, evangelical Christians, and weird Silicon Valley philosopher-kings. Perhaps predictably, the discourse has reached fever pitch as the far right has come roaring back to power, and Donald Trump (the self-proclaimed “fertilization president”), J. D. Vance, and their coterie have lent credibility and state power to the movement.

With the rapid increase in the visibility of the pronatalist right and the complicity of the media in treating low fertility as a serious crisis, there has also come an increasing insistence that the left engage with pronatalism, too.

I argue that the left does not need to engage with pronatalism in the sense of developing our own pronatalist positions and projects; that is, we need neither treat low birth rates as a real social problem, nor address genuine working-class concerns about them—because there aren’t any. Birth rate problems are technocratic problems that emerge primarily out of the failure of neoliberal biopolitics to adequately organize reproduction for the needs of capital; pronatalism is an attempt to impose an ideology that will do so, ideally without significant financial outlay on the part of the state. This is true whether the vector for pronatalism is the right-wing pursuit of “cultural change” and social control that constrains people’s options, reinforces patriarchal gender norms, and sells a vision of 1950s parenthood; or whether it is the centrist focus on fiscally responsible strategies with good return on investment, like child tax credits or modest subsidies that do not adequately address the structural problems that currently make early childhood education untenable for both workers and parents. [1]

For these reasons, we should take no part in pronatalism. The pressing need that pronatalism creates on the left, instead, is for us to understand it both as a nationalist and capitalist demand for reproductive labor and as a reentrenchment of the patriarchy. The left is well-equipped to think critically about how material conditions and class relations affect the role reproduction plays in people’s lives, and how a better world would change these conditions and relations. Left politics should respond not to the birth rate, but to the material needs of working class parents and children.

Varieties of left pronatalism

I am using “the left” and “pronatalism” somewhat fluidly here—for example, much recent work takes a broad and rosy view of what pronatalism actually is. Elizabeth Bruenig, in two leftish-pronatalism pieces for the Atlantic, characterizes it as “the principle that having children is good and should be promoted by society,” or even simply “supported by society,” in her reporting on the far right Natal Conference. [2] Other work, such as a Meagan Day piece framing a left response to the “birth rate crisis,” acknowledges that pronatalism is an ideology focused explicitly on the birth rate, and takes as given that the birth rate is a real problem. Day suggests that pronatalist ideology can and should be productively used to win socialist gains. [3] A similar, earlier piece in Jacobin comes to the same conclusion, although it first dismantles some common capitalist concerns about the birth rate. [4] This is a common

tactic among progressive liberals, as well – assuming that if the right is finally going to show interest in a social safety net, we might as well work with them on it [\[5\]](#)

Another recent Jacobin piece, by sociologist David Calnitsky, goes further, diving into why left-wing interest in the birth rate itself, rather than just an instrumental use of birth rate panic to win better social policies, is the correct approach. Calnitsky explains why “unmitigated fertility decline” really does spell disaster for society and human happiness. His interpretation is in line with much mainstream economic thought: fertility decline ruins society because it causes profound changes to productivity and care work, driven by a shifting population age structure. [\[6\]](#) His argument follows, in some ways, the fashion among effective altruists and longtermists, some of whom have recently advanced a “case for people” that assumes fertility will continue to free-fall for the decades to come unless someone intervenes. [\[7\]](#) (The longtermists’ book was reviewed in Jacobin as well). [\[8\]](#)

The left argument most aligned with broader trends in right-wing pronatalism is that of Dustin Guastella, writing for *Damage* magazine in late 2024. [\[9\]](#) Guastella, much like J. D. Vance, treats low birth rates as just one of many broader social problems caused by the erosion of the family. His piece is relatively less concerned with pronatalism per se than the others I’ve outlined here, and has already been rebutted from a feminist perspective in this journal. [\[10\]](#)

This is more or less the spectrum of current left thought on the population problem. In this essay, I advance and clarify some positions that have emerged in some of the work cited above, and push back on others. I approach this from the perspective of a demographer of reproduction who studies pronatalism and its effects on people’s lives.

Birth rate problems are technocratic problems that emerge primarily out of the failure of neoliberal biopolitics to adequately organize reproduction for the needs of capital; pronatalism is an attempt to impose an ideology that will do so, ideally without significant financial outlay on the part of the state.

But given the scale of the right-wing push on pronatalism and the way it has seeped leftward, it’s also important for the left to be literate about the birth rate and about what we do and don’t know about contemporary reproductive patterns. To this end, I offer here some technical arguments for why the “low” US birth rate is not a problem to be solved by pronatalism, as well as the beginnings of a left interpretation of low-fertility society.

Defining pronatalism

Leftists have sometimes been tempted to read pronatalism as a type of broader prosociality, as Elizabeth Bruenig does. Humans are good, children are good, and any just society should recognize childbearing as an important form of labor and support it—what’s a normal, well-adjusted person to disagree with here? And why wouldn’t the left be on board with this? If anything, the legacy of left feminist thought on reproductive labor should make us support it more. Positioned this way, support for pronatalism looks like a strategy with no political cost, and plenty to gain, especially as the left is stereotyped as antisocial, doomerish, and even deviant. [\[11\]](#)

However, understanding pronatalism as focused on the birth rate per se is crucial. Pronatalism takes demographic indicators—particularly the total fertility rate (explained further below)—as indicative of a social problem, and is oriented primarily toward manipulating those indicators. In this sense, it is the latest in a long line of elite demographic fixations, spanning from the early twentieth century eugenicists’ concern over the reproductive rates of native-born white women vis-à-vis other groups (both in the United States and in the United Kingdom), through to the Cold War “population bomb” panic, which was fueled by fear both of the supposed ecological threat posed by the fecundity of women in the Global South and of the potentially restive, procommunist populations that rapid population

growth might engender. [12] Unlike mortality, the other main domain of demography, fertility has always been troublesome, at least in the era of biopolitics. In the case of reducing mortality, convincing populations to behave biopolitically—to order their physical lives in ways aligned with state interests—is often fairly straightforward, because managing one’s health and living longer are often appealing to the individual for his or her own reasons. Bearing the number of children needed by the state is not necessarily as straightforward, especially as that number may be a moving target. [13]

It is crucial to understand this history and orientation of pronatalism, and to acknowledge mounting evidence from a variety of contexts showing that most family policy—from child tax credits to paid parental leave to universal preschool—simply does not raise birth rates by much. [14] Making a deal with pronatalists in order to win specific policy goals is a fool’s errand. The birth rates are their object of focus, and policies will not raise them.

Sociologist Philip Cohen has applied a theory called “pyrrhic defeat” from criminology to elite pronatalism. [15] In criminology, “pyrrhic defeat” describes how intensive policing and incarceration fail to achieve their stated goal of “crime reduction,” but in doing so provide justification for the continuation and growth of the police state and prison-industrial complex. [16] It is not hard to see the parallel with pronatalism, which instead provides justification for the reentrenchment of patriarchy. The inevitable failure of small-scale social investments to increase the birth rate will justify increasingly restrictive policies to return society to a past where the birth rate was not a problem—from anti-queer backlash to restrictions on contraception and abortion to proposals that women be tracked out of higher education and the white-collar labor force. Cohen’s analysis focuses on how pronatalism serves the political goal of encouraging racial, gender, and anti-immigrant resentment, keeping the electorate afraid of decline and “replacement,” and thus supportive of the strongman politicians who stoke these fears; but it also serves the goals of patriarchal capitalism. Even if it doesn’t raise birth rates, pronatalism serves to justify and perpetuate women’s role as providers of all the other cheap and free labor of social reproduction that capitalism requires. [17]

Low birth rates are simply not a problem

Concerns about population collapse often rely on layered and multifaceted misinterpretations of demographic data – misinterpretations of what demographic indicators can tell us, what time scale they tell it on, and what their limitations are. [18] This is not always deliberate; fertility data is actually fairly challenging to interpret correctly. Certain aspects of human reproductive behavior make overall levels of childbearing especially difficult to quantify: chiefly, the fact that having children is a process that can unfold over a long portion of the life course, from the teen years through midlife. This makes it difficult to look at data from a single year and situate it in the broader sweep of people’s lives.

But the metric most commonly used—the total fertility rate (TFR)—tries to do exactly this. The TFR is expressed as “children per woman,” and is essentially a sum of the childbearing experiences of different age groups at a given moment. [19] For example, in 2024, 15 to 19-year-olds produced roughly one one-hundredth of a child (put another way, one in a hundred women in this age group gave birth), 30 to 34-year-olds produced nine one-hundredths of a child (nine in a hundred women in this age group gave birth), and so on. [20] Sum all the ages together, and you get the fractional children that would be produced by the average woman if, across her whole reproductive life course, she behaved the way women in 2024 behaved. This is the TFR. In 2024, this number was 1.6, the lowest it has ever been in the United States. A composite woman who lived her entire reproductive life in the year 2024 would produce 1.6 children, well below the “replacement rate” of 2.1 children. [21]

The inevitable failure of small-scale social investments to increase the birth rate will justify increasingly restrictive policies to return society to a past where the birth rate was not a problem—from anti-queer backlash to restrictions on contraception and abortion to proposals that women be tracked out of higher education and the white-collar labor force.

Calculated this way, the TFR is an abstraction that freezes time. It ignores the fact that different years are different—someone who was 15 in 2024 will not also be 30 in 2024, or in a year that necessarily looks like 2024. 2039 will have its own political, social, economic, and environmental concerns. It will have its own landscape of contraceptives, abortion access, dating apps, housing markets, jobs, and the hundreds of other material realities that shape people's childbearing. What 30-year-olds today are doing in terms of carrying pregnancies is not necessarily, and certainly not inherently, related to what 30-year-olds in fifteen years will be doing.

Applying the same logic in the opposite direction, we see that the TFR implicitly assumes that the 30- to 34-year-olds who today produce nine one-hundredths of a child were once 15- to 19-year-olds who, like today's 15- to 19-year-olds, produced one one-hundredth of a child. But they weren't: looking at data from 2008, we see that today's 30- to 34-year-olds were roughly four times more likely to have a child in their later teen years than today's young people are. [22] Assuming that most people don't want to have unlimited children, having had more children earlier in life likely means having fewer children now. The 15-year-olds and the 30-year-olds are not commensurate in either direction.

This has been a problem for the TFR for decades, both in the United States and elsewhere. Most of the world has been experiencing a transition from an early pattern of childbearing toward a late one—a systemic shift, where each year looks different from the last and each cohort behaves a bit differently from the ones before it. [23] Indeed, the majority of the decrease in US fertility has been and is being caused by falling birth rates to those under age 25. [24]

As long as this transition is ongoing, the TFR will be artificially depressed with respect to actual people's fertility experiences. This gets to the heart of why US fertility should not be a concern: it's really not that low. Yes, the TFR is falling lower every year, but the TFR isn't "fertility" in any meaningful sense. It's one stylized metric, with its own idiosyncrasies and limitations. Completed fertility—the average past childbearing of people who are aging out of their reproductive year—has consistently been around 1.9 to 2 children per woman for the last thirty years, even during periods of significant change in the TFR. [25] Despite changes in the timing and circumstances of childbearing, American family size remains remarkably stable, and fairly high compared to other wealthy countries.

The narrative that fertility is in free fall, then, is not true. The now-constant ritual of panic over the latest birth numbers is based largely on misinterpretations of US fertility dynamics. However, it would be foolish to argue that completed fertility definitely will not fall in the coming decades.

Everyone has a pet theory for why childbearing may be changing more permanently, and there's truth to many of them. Trends among younger adults indicate that they are more comfortable deprioritizing or opting out of childbearing than previous generations were. And we know that the process of childbearing delay probably means that some people who do want children will have fewer than they meant to—they may change their minds, age out of childbearing before they find a partner, or experience age-related infertility. Finally and perhaps most pressingly, there are many aspects of contemporary political, social, and economic reality—like runaway housing costs, higher education debt, and lack of supports like guaranteed childcare, healthcare, and paid family leave—that push childbearing out of reach for more people and for longer stretches of young adult life. [26] If these forces don't change, completed family size is indeed likely to fall. But we haven't seen a strong indication that this is happening yet.

Low-fertility futures

Given that "the birth rate isn't that low" may only be true for so long, it's also important for the left to understand what (real) low fertility might mean for society.

At a glance, the ills low fertility is predicted to bring seem alarming: a top-heavy age structure, failing pension systems, stalled innovation, low productivity, an epidemic of lonely elders dying in solitude. But the only one that is guaranteed is the first; it's mathematically certain that lower fertility means a relatively larger share of older people in the population (assuming no immigration—and the idea that immigration is politically unpalatable or that we will “run out of” immigrants as fertility falls elsewhere are often key unspoken parts of these arguments). Sustained low fertility would also mean an end to an alleged sure-bet driver of macrolevel economic growth: a growing population. [27] But the other predictions are all contingent on social and economic structure.

The mainstream approach to analyzing the effects of falling birth rates tends to ignore this contingency, and also treats fertility as an economic input in a fairly crude way. As one example, I recently attended a talk by a well-known economist and demographer on the effect of the end of population growth on global labor markets. I was hoping for a complex model that might offer some new insights on the many ways population change might come to bear on the economy. I was disappointed to find that the analysis was mere arithmetic—it simply held labor force participation by age, sex, and country or region constant at current levels, and calculated how the size of the labor force would change as populations age and shrink.

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But it seems obvious that changing population structure would change labor force structure, not just numbers—not least because raising children in the home and participating in the labor market are often incompatible, and opting out of the latter to do the former remains common for parents of young children, especially mothers, in many contexts. Similarly, forces such as reduced pension funding would likely drive up labor force participation among older people. Further, even with falling fertility everywhere, countries at the core of the capitalist world system will likely continue to have the option of addressing labor shortages through immigration of working-age adults, a dynamic that would accelerate population change in the periphery and ameliorate it in the core.

This simplistic thinking is unfortunately common to analyses of how low birth rates are going to change society. These analyses tend to assume that other social and economic forces are robust to changing fertility patterns, and vice versa. This is especially true of longer-term models that purport to predict human extinction—such as a recent paper that pinpointed humanity's final demise at the year 2415, using fertility rates from the last five years and simply projecting them forward, generation on generation, until no humans are left. [28] If this sounds profoundly unserious, well, it is.

Those who use (and presumably believe) these models may counter that low fertility is common to essentially all modern humans—fertility levels vary across the world, but they are increasingly converging on a number below 2.1 children per woman. And even high-fertility contexts (for example, much of sub-Saharan Africa) and high-fertility subcultures within low-fertility contexts (for example, Mormons in the United States) are seeing falling birth rates. Given this, the modelers argue, it's justifiable to assume that low fertility is inevitable once humans know how to reliably control their fertility, and therefore robust to all other political, social and economic inputs. Our great-great-granddaughters, living in an immiserated band of the last thousand humans, will make the same fertility choices we do, simply because they can.

To me, this brings to mind an inevitable parallel to the tendency in the political and economic mainstream to naturalize capitalism. The actual period over which we have observed low fertility is a tiny fraction of human history, and it aligns fairly well with the rise of capitalism. Human reproductive behavior is diverse and heavily contextual. Having and raising children is one of many ways we can spend our time, and whether we choose to do so depends on how it is valued, how safe and manageable it is, what kind of labor it entails and how much help we have, and what other choices are available to us. Neoliberal capitalism, which internalizes nearly all the risks and expenses of

childbearing into the nuclear family and puts care work at odds with the paid labor necessary to survive, engenders a logic of childlessness. But there is no reason to think that this is natural, or that having 1.6 children is the endpoint for humanity; it seems natural only because of the naturalization of the context(s)—neoliberalism, the bourgeois family, the capitalist world system, gender systems, et cetera—in which childbearing currently happens.

The tendency toward oversimplification also holds for economic arguments advanced about low birth rates. Predictions of what population change will do—decrease economic growth and innovation, for instance—blithely ignore inputs to the economy that, in other cases, capitalists are incredibly eager to champion as the keys to future growth and abundance. It cannot be simultaneously true that we are entering an AI-led era of limitless productivity increases and that a shrinking labor force will cause inevitable economic collapse. Either you need the workers or you don't.

Jenny Brown suggested in her 2019 book *Birth Strike* that the capitalist obsession with birth rates has arisen because capitalists understand that lower birth rates mean fewer workers, and that labor is more powerful when it's scarce. [29] To be frank, I have not yet seen evidence of this level of awareness or analysis among capitalist pronatalists. If nothing else, the ruling class's relentless pursuit of mass deportations should make it clear that they aren't particularly concerned about letting workers amass too much power or about the economic effects of population decline more broadly—at least as long as the workers and the population are native-born. This apparent contradiction is evidence that elite pronatalism is a rhetorical strategy, and an instance of pyrrhic defeat, as much as or more than a material concern.

As fertility most likely continues to fall, pronatalist discourse will most likely be a part of US political culture for decades to come. This makes it important for the left to engage with. Fundamentally, does the left want to take the position that low fertility is a problem that must be addressed with pronatalist measures that ultimately seek to preserve capitalist social relations? I say no. Rather, the left is (as we have always been) uniquely equipped to think critically about how material conditions and class relations affect the role reproduction plays in people's lives, and how a better world would change these conditions and relations. And all left debate on these issues can and should be informed by reproductive justice, family abolition, and feminist thought.

More concretely, working-class concerns about reproduction—the costs of raising a family, the competing demands of paid employment and caregiving, the lack of a social safety net, the continued lack of recognition and remuneration for gendered labor—are what socialist politics should respond to, and we should respond to these while acknowledging that they are in key ways orthogonal to the birth rate. Getting wrapped up in manipulating people's lives to achieve replacement fertility is not the right move.

[Spectre](#)

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