



Modes of Reproduction (Malinowski Lecture for 1978)

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MODES OF REPRODUCTION

(Malinowski Lecture for 1978)

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The Malinowski lecture for 1978 is summarised below, since it is of unusual interest, and but for a misunderstanding would have appeared in *Man*. Readers are therefore advised that it appears in a special number of the *Journal of Development Studies* [July 1978].

Each day now world population increases by over two hundred thousand persons. The unprecedented growth is occurring in geographical areas where anthropologists have traditionally worked. There has been an increasing realisation that the main reason for the failure of attempts to control fertility is not technical but lies in the fact that in many societies people want more children than they normally produce, not fewer. There is a widespread belief, in the areas of rapid population growth, that the best way to maximise happiness is to maximise reproduction. Previous theories to account for this desire for extra children are not satisfactory. Desire for children is not entirely explained by either increased affluence, as Malthus argued, nor by an inherited need to compensate for high mortality, nor by the degree to which technology makes capital, not labour, the scarce factor in production. This last view, which implies that the desire for children will decline as mechanisation of agriculture reduces the need for human labour has recently been argued by Mamdani (1972), but it is inadequate.

England's history between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries is well documented. Its economy was based on plough cultivation and its population grew relatively slowly. Between 1380 and 1750 the number of inhabitants tripled from about two to six million. It provides a test case of the influence of the means of production on reproduction. It is the classic exception to Malthus' law, for resources grew steadily while population grew slowly or remained stationary (Wrigley 1969). This slow growth appears to have been the result of attitudes and institutions which discouraged high fertility. In many peasant and tribal societies marriage is primarily undertaken in order to produce children. English evidence shows that marriages were primarily to increase personal happiness by finding a loving spouse, for companionship and in order to find an economic partner. The wife's reproductive ability was of minor importance. Consequently, infertility was not treated with the pity or scorn that we find in many societies and was not a ground for separation or divorce. A woman's major role was not as a reproductive machine but as a business partner. The status of women did not increase as they produced more children. There was a singularly apathetic attitude towards female virginity before marriage, with no bridal sheet testing or 'honour and shame' complex. The chastity belt, of which there is evidence in many parts of Europe, was absent, except as a joke, in England.

Other indicators of an emphasis on reproduction and a high desire for children are also absent. There is no evidence of permitted testing of female fertility before marriage. First marriage occurred at a very late age for both men and women, on average in the mid-twenties for the latter (Hajnal 1965). Large proportions of both sexes never married; marriage was not a universal life-cycle stage. The absence of adoption and fostering, the evidence for the use of contraception and abortion, the treatment of pregnancy as a time of unpleasant sickness, all these point in the same direction. Furthermore, the statements people made about general attitudes to having children

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makes it clear that offspring were regarded as either the price one paid for sexual pleasure or, at the best, as a source of emotional gratification. They were not believed to be important either spiritually or economically to their parents. There seems, in fact, to have been a conflict between production and reproduction.

The reason why England breaks the hypothesis that links the means of production and the attitude to reproduction is that, as Marx realised in his criticism of Malthus, it is not the productivity or necessity of children's labour that is the key to the matter, but rather the value of children to their parents and kin (Marx 1973: 606). The solution lies in the realm of the relations of production, in other words kinship and concepts of property. What is now becoming clear is that in most 'peasant' societies, where the 'family is the basic unit of peasant ownership, consumption and social life' (Shanin 1971: 241), in order to maximise production one must also increase reproduction. The social and the demographic units overlap. The problem is that England has been regarded as yet another 'peasant' society by Marx, Weber and subsequent historians and sociologists, and we would therefore have expected an emphasis on fertility. It is now becoming clear that from at least the thirteenth century England seems to have been different from other recorded peasantries, whether in Europe or Asia, in its fundamental economic and social structure. There was no concept of 'family property'; the basic unit was not a group of parents and children but the individual. This was enshrined in the thirteenth century maxim *Nemo est heres viventis*, no-one is the heir of a living man (Pollock & Maitland 1968: 308). A child was not part of a property-owning group, a productive and consuming unit, with his parents. England for centuries before the industrial revolution had no 'domestic mode of production'. This view of English history, which runs contrary to the received wisdom, helps to explain why there was such an unusual fertility pattern. It also helps to explain many other features which are associated with the peculiar intellectual, social, political and economic history of England (Macfarlane 1978).

We may distinguish two 'modes of reproduction'. Where, as in most large peasant societies, the basic unit of society is a family or kin group, each new child is an asset, contributing to the welfare of the group, increasing prestige and political power as well as economic well-being. In this situation family planning goes right against the interests of both the group and the individual. The other extreme case is well documented for hunter-gatherers and modern industrial societies. It is the one where the individual is not subsumed into a family group. Here children do not provide the means to affluence or prestige, but must be chosen as one among a set of alternative paths to happiness and security. England in the centuries before the industrial revolution is also an example of this case and suggests that the pattern is not connected to the techniques of production as such but rather to the nature of ownership and the distribution of wealth. Where the units of production, consumption, ownership and reproduction are one and the same, people will desire children and fertility will be high; where the individual is the basic unit, operating in different spheres with different people, then children will not be desired in the same way. Until this fact is fully appreciated, attempts to bludgeon unwilling 'peasants' to give up what they perceive to be their economic livelihood are bound to fail.

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