

more involved. I have focused, and will continue to focus, on the first side more than on the second. What must be kept in mind throughout, however, is that coexisting with the New Fatherhood of the Machine Age were enclaves of irresponsibility and abuse. For some children and women, fatherhood was not synonymous with hugs and kisses at all, but was a living hell.

In one of the preceding letters, a mother said that she was "willing [to] have as many [children] as possible." Not everyone, it seems, was as willing as she; consequently, over the years, the Children's Bureau received numerous requests for birth control advice. These requests, generally prompted by fears that having more children would tax already meager provisions, illustrated also the gulf that existed between the reality communicated in the manuals and the reality communicated in the letters. Typical of the letters in this category was this plea from an Axtell, Kansas, mother:

I have followed Your book on Infant Care and found it Wonderful. But I'm Comming With My largest problem. I am Mother of 2 little boys 1 yr. apart & expect to be Mother again this summer. Im only in my twenties. We Rent a farm & find it a hard row to hoe. To provide food & clothe for us all. We can not Meet expenses. My health is going down hill from hard work & Bearing babies. My husband Works hard & Worries. Also has the Asthama so bad in Winter I find Myself doing a Man's work. This is hard to be mother, wife, & especially the out side work. Now what I want to know is why can't we poor people be given Birth Control as well as Dr.'s & the Rich people that could provide & Dr. their families. We need help to prevent any more babies. . . . don't you think it better to be Parents of 3 which We are willing to work & do all we can for them, to raise & provide food for us all, then to hafto have 6 or more that would take us down into the grave & leave 6 or more for poverty to take & be Motherless.¹⁹

As much as the Children's Bureau staff may have sympathized with the mother's situation, it could not offer much assistance. The reason is that during the Machine Age, the U.S. government had a policy of not offering information about birth control. Thus, the Children's Bureau's official response to this letter—and to all the letters it received on birth control during this time—was both brief and deliberately unresponsive: "Your letter of January 13 is acknowledged. We are glad our publication on Infant Care has proved helpful. We have no publications on 'Birth Control.' Very truly yours, . . ."²⁰

When the 1930s arrived, the Children's Bureau, as well as many other government agencies, began to receive letters from people whose family incomes had precipitously dropped. *Infant Care* may have been able to

ignore the Great Depression; the average American could not. An Elk River, Minnesota, woman pleaded, "I'm going to make an appeal to you to see if I cant get some help. We have written to the Senator and he said to go to the bussness men and also wrote to the Governor but nothing has been done and the bussness men refused to give my husband some work so we wouldn't have to ask for things and the Welfare Board refused to give us what we need we have asked serval times all we can get out of them is flour and yeast and 3 of my children are sick with the whooping cough."²¹ A Bronx, New York, mother confessed, "[T]his letter is written to ask charity. My husband has been out of work for several months and we have been living on the charity of neighbors. I have a new-born babe and cannot see where the next meal is coming from. Won't you please help us, or have someone help us as we are in terrible need. Naturally we cannot feed a child with no money. Hope to hear soon, my strongest hopes are going with this letter."²² And from Brooklyn, New York, there was this: "I would appreciate it very much if it is in within your power to help me out. As you know I have two children and am about to become mother to another one. Therefore if it's possible for you to get a letter of recognition from some high authority in Washington so that my husband will be able to get some kind of work. He has tried to work for the last nine months but it has not been successful to get any work and Besides my children are not getting the proper care."²³

During the Depression, there were some men who translated unemployment into more contact with children. Most fathers who lost their jobs during the Depression, or who suffered a loss of income, however, tended to withdraw, physically and psychologically, from family life.²⁴ For households with infants, a father's absence could take on special significance, because of the amount of effort that infant care required (the diapering, the feeding, the getting up in the middle of the night, etc.). Without the father, there would be one less worker to share the load.

The question is, however, did men during the Machine Age really have all that much to do with infants? And if they did not, why say their contribution would be missed? The answer, briefly stated, is this: There were men during the Machine Age who contributed little in the way of infant care, but there were others who were not oblivious to their newborns' needs.

MEN WROTE, TOO

The fact that most of the letters received by the Children's Bureau were from women probably explains why scholars generally have applauded the