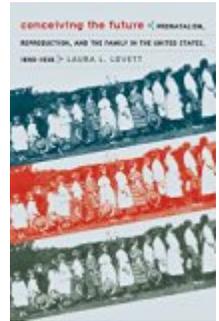




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Modernism, Pronatalism, and Nostalgia for the White Farm Family

In *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890-1938*, Laura L. Lovett provides a refreshing perspective on American reproductive politics in the Populist and Progressive eras. While historians of American eugenics tend to focus on “negative” eugenic campaigns like forced sterilization and immigration restriction, Lovett examines the “positive” eugenic implications of various campaigns that celebrated the reproductive vitality and democratic promise of the rural white family. Indeed, Lovett persuasively links American pronatalism with racialized forms of American agrarianism from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s. Lovett argues that, while France and Germany overtly sponsored pronatalism through state programs and subsidies, American pronatalism was indirectly expressed in movements as diverse as Populism, campaigns for irrigation and land reclamation, conservationism, and “fitter family” contests.

Lovett’s project is broad in scope, encompassing the careers of five historical figures, each of whom, Lovett argues, contributed significantly to American pronatalism. These figures include Populist Mary Elizabeth Lease, George Maxwell of the National Irrigation Association, economist and sociologist Edward A. Ross, President Theodore Roosevelt, and Florence Sherbon, organizer of “fitter family” contests. Through her analysis of these figures and their work, Lovett asserts that American pronatalism thrived in the interstices between agrarian ideology, modernist reform politics, and the nostalgic embrace of the rural, white home. Throughout the project, Lovett

analyzes the complex interplay of nostalgia for a rural past and faith in modern science and government that animated the careers of each of the five figures whom she studies. Lovett’s concept of “nostalgic modernism,” which she uses to describe how each of her figures invoked traditional rural ideals in support of scientific and governmental expertise, captures a crucial dialectic of reform and regulation in the Populist and Progressive eras.

The first figure whom Lovett addresses is Mary Elizabeth Lease. In her chapter devoted to Lease, Lovett argues that Lease and other Populist women sought political and economic power through their central place in the rural producer-family. According to Lovett, Lease’s maternalism justified her role as a female political leader, but it also reinforced a notion of motherhood that was both essentializing and implicitly racist. Lovett argues that Lease’s maternalism idealized the rural producer family while lamenting the growth of America industrialism with it teeming immigrant populations. Lovett considers not only Lease’s support for Populism but also her involvement with the Kansas State Board of Charities and a subsequent tropical colonization scheme. Taken together, Lovett argues, these aspects of Lease’s career exemplify the interplay between agrarian ideology, scientific racism, and modern state regulation that characterized pronatalism in this period.

Lovett’s next chapter examines George Maxwell, his ties to the National Irrigation Association, and his idealization of the rural, male-headed home. That Lovett is

able to identify pronatalism in the rhetoric and practices of the National Irrigation Association is a testament to the uniqueness and complexity of her analysis. Lovett writes that “land reclamation ... was as much an effort at social engineering as it was hydrological engineering” (p. 13). She demonstrates that Maxwell used the ideal of the male-headed home situated in healthful, rural surroundings to promote irrigation and land reclamation, as well as to establish “homecroft” communities in the Midwest and elsewhere. Lovett contends that the success of national reclamation and irrigation legislation in 1902, which expanded federal authority over land use, owed much to the National Irrigation Association’s rhetorical commitment to the rural, male-headed home.

Following her chapter on Maxwell, Lovett considers economist and sociologist Edward A. Ross’s concept of race suicide. Lovett notes that while Ross criticized feminists for reproducing too little and immigrants for reproducing too much, he also “idealized a natural order that nostalgically reconstructed the American rural family” (p. 79). Shaped by generations of frontier experience, Ross’s rural family ideal represented the best of the “American race” at a time when farm life was giving way to “the deteriorating influence of city and factory” (p. 89). Lovett shows how Theodore Roosevelt extended the influence of Ross’s ideas by taking up the theme of race suicide and actively promoting large rural families as an antidote to the growth of new immigrant populations in the nation’s cities. Lovett’s discussion of the new photographic conventions for representing the white family, which placed children in a stair-step formation that emphasized the close spacing of siblings, is particularly engaging.

Next, Lovett examines Theodore Roosevelt’s campaign to conserve both the nation’s natural resources and its ideals of the rural family and country life. She focuses on two commissions launched in 1908: the National Conservation Commission and the Country Life Commission. While much has been made of Roosevelt’s commitment to conservation, Lovett places that commitment in a broader, eugenic context, demonstrating that conservation commissioners like Gifford Pinchot and Sir William Plunkett were also involved in the preservation of country life and its most vital institution, the farm family. By demonstrating how women’s groups like the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) promoted the welfare of farm wives, Lovett once again implicates maternalism in the scientific racism of the eugenics movement. A final section of the chapter addresses eugenic family studies of

small New England towns, further reflecting how a nostalgic preoccupation with rural folkways was combined with a concern for rural families’ scientific betterment.

Lovett’s final chapter, which focuses on Dr. Florence Sherbon and the “fitter family” contests of the 1920s, explicitly ties the idealization of rural life to the eugenics movement. According to Lovett, Sherbon organized better baby contests in Iowa and briefly worked for the Children’s Bureau in the 1910s before organizing fitter family contests in Kansas and becoming a child welfare specialist at the University of Kansas in the 1920s. While other scholars have disregarded the fitter family competitions of the 1920s, Lovett argues that they carried broad cultural significance and helped to propagate a positive concept of eugenics that, like Lovett’s other examples, drew on nostalgia for the rural white family while promoting expert intervention into Americans’ reproductive practices. Lovett notes that while the families who participated in fitter family contests in Kansas were few in number, they enjoyed broad cultural visibility as exemplars of white, rural fecundity at time when many Americans remained apprehensive about the cosmopolitan cast of modern urban life. Sherbon’s career further illustrates the intersections between maternalism, agrarianism, and scientific racism that Lovett identifies with Mary Elizabeth Lease, DAR President Mrs. Matthew T. Scott, and other female reformers.

Lovett’s research is impressive. Her intellectual portraits of Lease, Maxwell, Ross, Roosevelt, and Sherbon—each of which addresses the specific figure’s simultaneous investment in reproductive politics and agrarianism—are detailed and engaging. In addition to analyzing a specific historical figure, each chapter also addresses a series of minor figures and related cultural developments. The scope of Lovett’s study is therefore quite broad—so broad, at times, that her focus on pronatalism is diffused.

Some of Lovett’s figures seem more relevant to the history of pronatalism than others. Lovett’s chapter on Mary Elizabeth Lease focuses primarily on Lease’s maternalism, not on pronatalism *per se*. Certainly, Lease based her leadership claims on her ability to speak for mothers, children, and the ideal of the rural producer-family. Lovett also discusses how Lease’s maternalism propelled her onto the Kansas State Board of Charities and informed her advocacy a tropical conlonization scheme. While Lovett’s research into Lease’s career is impressive, she could do more to establish and foreground Lease’s contributions to pronatalist thought. Likewise, Lovett could do more to establish how George Maxwell’s ac-

tivism on behalf of irrigation and land reclamation constituted a significant contribution to American pronatalism. Lovett presents an engaging analysis of Maxwell's homecroft ideal, with its focus on the rural, male-headed home. Yet, Lovett stops short of calling Maxwell a pronatalist. Instead, she asserts that he "was sympathetic to American pronatalist concerns, and his family ideal acknowledged women's reproductive role" (p. 74). Neither Lease's maternalism nor Maxwell's homecroft movement was explicitly concerned with propagation of the white race in the way that Ross's social theory, Roosevelt's conservationism, and Sherbon's fitter family contests were. Indeed, Lovett could do more to explain how Lease's and Maxwell's relevance to American pronatalism is greater than that of other late-nineteenth-century

reformers who touted traditional concepts of motherhood, family, and the home.

Lovett's case for the "positive" eugenic influence of Ross, Roosevelt, and Sherbon is much stronger than it is for Lease and Maxwell. In these cases, Lovett persuasively illustrates how American pronatalism incorporated nostalgia for the rural, white family into its campaign on behalf of scientific racism and reproductive regulation. While Lease and Maxwell are less convincing as pronatalists, all of Lovett's chapters are rich and thought-provoking. Throughout *Conceiving the Future*, Lovett offers incisive intellectual portraits and a challenging analysis of how gender and race informed the dynamic of residual agrarianism and emergent scientific and governmental regulation in the Populist and Progressive eras.

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