“FRANCE NEEDS CHILDREN”:
Pronatalism, Nationalism and Women’s Equity

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This article examines debates and discussions surrounding French pronatalist policies enacted in the 1980s. Drawing on data collected from a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including daily newspapers, parliamentary debates, and French feminist publications, I explore the following questions: First, does pronatalism spring from conservative nationalist ideologies that conflict with feminist projects? Second, how have French feminists reacted to the pronatalist agenda? Finally, could women’s equity serve as an impetus for instituting policies that would encourage births? My analysis suggests that nationalism in France takes many forms, and a wide spectrum of political actors from both the political left and right have supported pronatalist initiatives in the name of “the nation.”

Over the past several decades many governments have introduced policies and programs designed to influence fertility levels. Most policies have been antinatalist, aimed at bringing down high birthrates, usually under the rubric of "family planning." But as of 1995, no fewer than forty-seven countries had pronatalist policies aimed at maintaining or raising fertility (UN 1996). While there is an enormous social science literature on antinatalist programs in developing countries, the literature on state efforts to encourage births through pronatalist measures is relatively sparse. However, this small literature has recently begun to grow, in part due to an increased interest in pronatalism on the part of feminist scholars.

Fertility policies are especially significant for women who, as bearers of children, tend to be affected most by state efforts at population engineering. Pronatalist programs are specifically relevant to women in at least three ways. First, pronatalist policies may include measures to limit access to contraceptives or abortion as part of an overall plan to increase births. Second, policies can affect women’s economic status through birth allowances, single-parent benefits, or state-run childcare facilities that make it easier for women to participate in the formal labor force. Finally, pronatalist programs can influence gender roles by promoting particular family forms, such as one where the mother remains home with children. One central question in feminist research on pronatalism is whether or not pronatalist ideologies and policies inherently conflict with women’s rights projects.

Most feminist researchers view with extreme caution any state attempt to influence reproduction. State concern with low birthrates has led to draconian policies, such as the

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eugenics policies of Nazi Germany, where the government attempted to increase births to Aryan women by restricting abortion and providing financial incentives for childbearing while subjecting numerous minority women to forced sterilization (Bock 1984). Decades later, the stringent pronatalist measures of Nicolae Ceausescu’s Romania denied women legal access to contraceptives and abortion and forced those working in government-run industries to undergo regular gynecological exams designed to prevent the termination of pregnancies (Kligman 1992). Even when pronatalist policies are more measured, policy makers and pronatalist activists are often more concerned with ensuring the reproduction of “the nation” than with women’s interests.

One of the main theoretical perspectives feminists use to study pronatalism centers on the ways in which nationalist ideologies have led to the desire to encourage births to members of the collective. Most scholars using theories of nationalism to frame their studies argue that pronatalist policies are largely the result of conservative nationalist ideologies that, because they tend to advocate “traditional” roles for women, conflict with feminist goals (Hamilton 1995; Heng and Devan 1992; Yuval-Davis 1989). And while women’s groups have occasionally sought to co-opt nationalist desires for more children as a way to gain rights and privileges from the state, such efforts have met with limited success (Cova 1991; Maroney 1992).

A different theoretical perspective focuses on welfare state expansion and/or the implications of specific state policies for women. In this perspective, pronatalism is seen as one force among many driving the formation of social policy. Such studies have been more mixed in their assessment of how pronatalism may affect women’s rights than studies focusing on nationalism. Some argue that pronatalism has led lawmakers away from family policies that would truly advance feminist goals (Jenson and Sineau 1995). Others have pointed to the fact that many policies motivated by pronatalism, such as parental leave or state-sponsored child care, are positive for women (Offen 1991; Heitlinger 1991). Alena Heitlinger (1991, p. 344; see also 1987; 1993), who has studied pronatalist policies in Eastern and Western Europe, Canada, and Australia, even argues that while “many demographers and feminists assume that promoting gender equality and elevating the birth rates is incompatible . . . there is no inherently antagonistic relationship of this sort . . . There may be mutually compatible pronatalist and women’s equity policies.” Heitlinger goes on to argue that women’s equity could serve as the impetus for states to institute social policies broadly defined as pronatalist (p. 371).

In this article, I draw on these two perspectives to analyze recent pronatalist initiatives in the country with the most long-standing interest in raising fertility and some of the most broad-reaching pronatalist incentives existent: France. I examine public debates and discussions surrounding the institution of pronatalist measures in the 1980s to address the following questions: First, are pronatalist policies in that country the product of conservative nationalist ideologies? Or have political actors on both ends of the political spectrum supported pronatalist efforts? Second, have French feminists sought to co-opt the desire for more children in order to gain rights and benefits from the state? Or have they rejected pronatalism as antifeminist because of a perceived threat to women’s rights? Finally, is it possible to imagine women’s equity as a motivator for instituting pronatalist programs, such as family allowances, part-time employment opportunities, and lengthy maternity leaves? To examine these issues, I outline current pronatalist measures, explore the motivations of the French government for instituting and continuing to support pronatalist policies,' and analyze French feminist responses to government efforts to raise fertility.
DATA AND METHODS

This study draws on a variety of sources. In addition to secondary materials, I examined articles, editorials, and letters from two French daily newspapers with extremely wide readerships, *Le Monde* (targeted to a fairly “liberal,” intellectual audience) and *Le Figaro* (a much more conservative daily). I examined articles from the Marxist feminist quarterly *Cahiers du Féminisme* and from the more academic journal *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*. I also analyzed transcripts of parliamentary debates. While I was able to examine all the relevant articles in the feminist publications, which are much more limited in number, I examined the French daily newspapers more selectively, focusing on moments when major decisions were being debated in the legislature or when a particular event created controversy. While my reading does not constitute a representative sample of all articles on pronatalist policy in the French press, it is, I think, enough to reveal the “flavor” of the discourse.

To set the stage, I describe actual policies in place in the mid-1990s, then provide a historical overview summarizing how concern over slow population growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries eventually led to pronatalist initiatives in the 1920s and 1930s. Most of this study, however, focuses on policy changes that took place during the mid-1980s. Important policy shifts occurred during this period, and public debate intensified as new measures were discussed and instituted. In addition, by the mid-1980s, women’s rights issues had made their way into the mainstream political arena. Women had moved into the labor force in large numbers in the 1970s, and the feminist movement had fought for and won the legalization of abortion in 1975. Thus, politicians and activists developing pronatalist programs in the 1980s were forced to be somewhat more attentive to women’s social rights and reproductive autonomy than previously (Hantrais 1993). Finally, because discourse surrounding certain events of the 1980s linked immigration and pronatalism, this period serves to illuminate the very strong connections between nationalism and pronatalist policies.

WHAT IS A PRONATALIST POLICY?

What exactly is a pronatalist policy? The answer is anything but obvious. Many government measures, such as tax deductions for children or mandated maternity leave, could potentially encourage births. Thus, most Western European countries, with their large welfare states, could be considered implicitly pronatalist. For this study, however, I analyzed programs and policies implemented with the expressed purpose of increasing fertility.

France has a long history of pronatalism and, according to a 1995 U.N. population policy survey, its government claims to have an explicit goal of encouraging births and raising fertility (UN 1996). I chose to focus on explicit measures because, when policies have clearly articulated pronatalist goals, it is more likely that there will be open debate over whether the policy orientation is appropriate.

Within France only certain programs seem to have an explicitly natalist impetus. At least since the presidency of Giscard d’Estaing in the 1970s, the French government has sought to “globalize” its pronatalist initiatives. This means that pronatalism cuts across many areas of government. Thus, the national health care system provides thorough coverage of maternity and infant health care. Employment regulations call for lengthy maternity leaves—sixteen weeks for the first two children and twenty-six weeks for a third child.
(Lenoir 1991). Government-supported nurseries (“crèches”) provide low cost (or no cost, depending on one’s financial resources) child care.2 Tax policy favors those with children (Lenoir 1991). Incentives exist for businesses to create part-time jobs to facilitate combining parenting and labor force participation. Even the national rail system participates in the pronoatalist cause and families with children receive reduced prices on train fares (Chesnais 1989).

Family policy, however, is the heart of the pronatalist initiative (McIntosh 1983). Because of its centrality to the pronatalist effort, I focus mainly on the family benefit system and particularly the programs with the most obviously natalist intent, such as the Parenting Allowance (allocation parental d’éducation). The government’s interest in encouraging births has led to the institution of generous family benefits that, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, have been especially geared to those with three or more children.

**French Family Policy in the Mid-1990s**

Since the complexity of the system makes it incomprehensible, since it leads to a total opacity for its beneficiaries and even for its administrators, a question arises: . . . haven’t we gone a bit too far?

Jean-Jacques Dupeyroux “Pour ouvrir le débat sur la complexité”

French family policy in the mid-1990s4 consists of an unwieldy set of measures that have been pieced together, added to, and subtracted from for over fifty years. Table 1 provides a list of the key components. Critics claim that, due to the complexity of the family benefits system and the fact that it undergoes regular alterations, potential beneficiaries have trouble learning exactly what they are eligible for (Herzlich and Normand 1993; Dupeyroux 1995). But though politicians often declare the need to simplify the system—indeed, both Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (in the 1970s) and François Mitterrand (in the 1980s) streamlined the programs somewhat—family policy remains an agglomerate of old and new benefits, paying varying amounts depending on number of children and sometimes on family income.

Family benefits account for about 15 percent of all social benefits (Calzada, Rotman, and Volovitch 1996) and are administered primarily by the National Union of Family Allowance Funds (Caisse National d’Allocations Familiales). These funds began as private initiatives in the 1920s and were slowly brought under state control. All employers are required to pay into these funds for their employees, though not all benefits are dependent on people’s work history. Most of the programs are universal, thus eligibility is not dependent on income. While critics claim it is unfair to pay family allowances to those who may not “need” them, welfare state analysts generally agree that universal programs are stronger and resist budget cuts precisely because most people benefit (Esping-Anderson 1990). Family allowances are calculated according to a percentage of a “monthly base for family allowances” (base mensuelle d’allocations familiales or BMAF) which in 1993 was 2,014 francs (Calzada et al. 1996). These allowances pay varying amounts to parents; most benefits become more generous with each additional child.

By world standards, these allowances are clearly beneficent; yet the family benefits system has had only a marginal impact on fertility (Lévy 1992). Nonetheless, they have surely affected many women’s social and economic security. The generous set of allowances listed in Table 1 is the result of governmental reworking and refinancing, beginning
TABLE 1. FAMILY ALLOWANCES IN FRANCE, 1993

| Universal (not dependent on income) | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Family Allowance                  | Provided to any family with two or more children. Pays 32 percent of the BMAF* (or 642 francs) for families with two children and 41 percent of the BMAF (826 francs) for any children after that. |
| Young Child Allowance             | Payments begin at the fifth month of pregnancy and continue until the baby is three months old. In addition, this allowance is extended as a targeted benefit for less affluent families for children aged three months to three years. Pays 45.95 percent of the BMAF. |
| Parenting Allowance (allocation parental d’education) | For families with two children where the youngest is under the age of three years. One of the parents must stay home with the child. Until 1994 (Journal Officiel, July 25, 1994) this allowance was only paid for third children and was adopted with clear pronatalist intentions. Pays 142.57 percent of the BMAF. |
| Home Child Care Allowance         | Universal benefit provided to families where both partners are employed in the labor force and have a child under the age of three, to help defray cost of hiring an in-home child-care provider. Single parents are also eligible for this allowance. |
| Aide for Employing a Licensed Child-Care Provider | Allowance for hiring a licensed home child-care provider for families with children under six years old. |
| Family Support Allowance          | Provides allowance for families raising orphans or in the case of single parents where the nonpresent parent pays no child support. |
| Family Housing Allowance          | Mostly for families receiving family benefits but can also go to childless couples during their first five years of marriage. |
| Targeted Programs (eligibility dependent on income) | | |
| Family Supplement                 | Provided to families with three or more children. Pays 41.65 percent of the BMAF. |
| Single Parent Allowance           | Provided to single parents with a child under the age of three. Pays approximately 150 percent of BMAF. |
| “Back to School” Allowance        | For families with school-age children, ages six to twelve. Paid only once, it equals 20 percent of the BMAF. |

*Base mensuelle d’allocations familiales or monthly base for family allowances.

in the late 1970s, of family policy instituted prior to World War II. In the following sections, I first briefly describe the development of state efforts to raise fertility prior to World War II. Then I examine the more recent discourse surrounding family policy with the following questions in mind: Has conservative nationalism been the driving ideology behind the recent wave of pronatalism? How were “women’s rights” represented in debates over policy insititution? Has the revival of pronatalism conflicted with feminist goals?

EXPLAINING STATE INVOLVEMENT IN FERTILITY

France was the first European country (probably the first country in the world) to experience a transition from high to low fertility. By the late nineteenth century, the French pop-
ulation was experiencing slow growth compared to all other European countries. In response to this downward turn in birthrates, two social movements emerged that were to be extremely influential in state pronatalist initiatives. One group, the “natalists,” believed raising the French birthrate was vital to maintaining or increasing French military and economic strength (Lenoir 1991). The natalists, convinced by demographic and statistical studies that France’s power as a nation depended on a growing population, advocated government intervention to stimulate population growth. These activists were particularly concerned that a low birthrate weakened France’s ability to compete militarily and economically with Germany. According to Rémi Lenoir (1991), this group was primarily concerned with number of births and tended to be relatively indifferent to moral concerns about family forms.

Also during the late 1800s, a second group, the “familialists,” began initiatives to encourage large families. This group, comprised mainly of Catholic leaders and social activists, saw the trend toward smaller families as the result of declining morals (Pedersen 1993a). French Catholicism, its power and influence greatly reduced since the Revolution, found a cause in “the family.” Their ideal was a large family with a patriarchal head. Lenoir (1991, p. 146) writes that “... the defense of the family was one of the unifying principles of disparate efforts that had a common objective: political conservatism through a revival of morality, in which the family was both symbol and means. In short, the real issue was the way in which the family would affect social structure and the political structure to which it is bound.”

The institution of family benefits through private, employer-sponsored family funds was in large part a result of familialist pressure. An extensive system of private family benefit funds, which offered allowances to workers with children, emerged during the first decades of the twentieth century alongside a growing body of state legislation focussed on increasing population growth. Businesses increasingly began providing family allowances to employees, first to promote workforce stability and keep wages down and, second, because by paying family allowances voluntarily they hoped to prevent state intervention (Messu 1992; Pedersen 1993b).

Natalists, on the other hand, advocated state intervention and, after World War I, successfully lobbied for increased government action. Severe population losses during the war caused more politicians, business leaders, and scholars to believe in the importance of encouraging births. Previous legislation had attempted to address slow population growth mainly through policies aimed at reducing infant mortality; because these laws usually aimed to make motherhood more compatible with paid labor, they had been helpful to many working-class women (Klaus 1993). After the war, however, lawmakers passed legislation intended to affect birthrates directly. A 1920 law called for fines and imprisonment for “divulging, offering to divulge, or facilitating the use of methods of contraception.” In 1923, legislation facilitated the prosecution of abortionists and their clients. Abortion had been illegal since 1810 but the law was largely ignored (McBride Stetson 1987). The new law made abortion a misdemeanor (though with very stiff fines or imprisonment), thus eliminating the need for prosecution by jury; juries had been hesitant to prosecute abortion cases, possibly because abortion was so widespread (McBride Stetson 1987).

But repressing contraception and abortion proved largely ineffective in raising birthrates. Fertility remained low, probably because knowledge about and acceptance of contraceptives and abortion had diffused throughout the French population (McBride Stetson 1987). Pronatalist activists and politicians thus began to look to incentives to encourage
people to have children. In 1932, a law required all employers to join a family allowance fund (these funds were still private), and in 1938 a “stay-at-home mother’s allowance” was instituted. Then, in 1939, with the Code de la Famille, the government implemented the country’s first truly comprehensive family policy. The Family Code brought the family funds under state control and provided for family allowances, birth premiums, supplemental allowances for mothers in urban areas, and interest free loans to young couples in the agricultural sector; these provisions were clearly intended to stimulate fertility (McIntosh 1983; see also Pedersen 1993b). In fact, by the late 1930s, pronatalism had become a doctrine supported by a wide spectrum of political and economic interest groups; while business leaders had previously resisted state intervention in the area of family benefits, many employers now adopted the position of pronatalists that state intervention was necessary for increasing French fertility and that raising fertility was in the national interest (Pedersen 1993b).

French women were active in both the Catholic family organizations (Pedersen 1993a) and in the more nationalist-oriented natalist groups. Because pronatalism was such a powerful ideology, feminists felt compelled to address the issue. According to Anne Cova (1991, p. 119), “the strategy of the feminist movement as a whole was to utilize the apparent demographic danger and the glorification of motherhood as a weapon in the struggle for the rights of mothers.” Feminists attempted to use women’s reproductive capacity to gain rights and privileges from the state, such as government-sponsored child support (Cova 1991; Offen 1991; Pedersen 1993b). This strategy yielded mixed results. While some of the benefits were helpful to many women, family policy during the 1930s took a strong turn toward supporting a “traditional” type of family form by providing a stipend for stay-at-home mothers (Pedersen 1993b). Most feminists opposed this. One woman wrote in 1933, “The return of woman to the home, to the kitchen, that means wanting to shut the woman up in the narrow circle of the family, in the landscape of the stewpot of the husband and the chamberpot of the children. It means keeping her in domestic slavery” (Rougé quoted in Pedersen 1993b, p. 404). Yet this was precisely the direction the Vichy government6 took during the war, expanding pronatalist measures and increasingly emphasizing women’s roles as homemakers and mothers.

During the years immediately following World War II—widely known by pronatalists as the “golden age” of family policy—public and governmental support for pronatalist measures was stronger than ever, due to a near consensus that German occupation could have been avoided if only France’s population had grown more rapidly in the years previous to the war (McIntosh 1983). Nearly all politicians, activists and interest groups agreed that births should be encouraged. Thus, family allowances were extended for the first time to nonworkers (this made some women, who had been previously denied family benefits, eligible) and to all types of families, regardless of whether children were “legitimate” or not and regardless of nationality (Lenoir 1991).

Because of France’s pronatalist agenda, French women, compared to women of other Western European countries, fared relatively well; they gained lengthy maternity leaves, family allowances, and benefits for those who wished to remain home with children while retaining the right to participate in the paid labor force (Offen 1991). On the other hand, the reproductive rights of French women were stifled by repressive legislation at a time when women in other Western countries were gaining ground in that arena (McBride Stetson 1987). Overall, the ideological forces influencing family policy prior to and immediately following World War II were indeed conservative and nationalist-oriented. Women’s
rights were never a motivation for creating family benefits. How closely linked to this historical tradition is the pronatalism of the 1980s and 1990s?

THE PRONATALIST REVIVAL

With the postwar baby boom that occurred in most Western countries, interest in pronatalist programs flagged by the mid-1950s. Reasons for the baby boom remain unclear. Some demographers and policy makers claimed that birthrates were up because the pronatalist programs were working (e.g., Sauvy 1969); however, fertility rose in countries with no pronatalist policies (such as the United States) as well. But because fertility rates were relatively high, for two decades French policy makers largely neglected family programs and, by 1970, most of the financial incentives offered to people with children were little more than symbolic because they had not risen with inflation (Lenoir 1991). During this period, birth rates, demographic “decline,” and pronatalism ceased to be central in political discourse. However, several crucial trends coincided in the 1970s to spark renewed interest in encouraging births. Birth rates, which had been relatively high during the postwar baby boom, began to decline dramatically. The feminist movement lobbied for and won the legalization of contraceptives in 1967 and of abortion in 1975; some worried that this would cause the birthrate to decline even further. Moreover, women entered the labor force in large numbers during the 1970s, at the same time that unemployment was rising and anti-immigrant sentiment along with it.7

These recent demographic, economic and social trends, combined with the historical tradition of state involvement in fertility, led to a strong pronatalist revival in the late 1970s and 1980s, when many of the programs in force today were constructed. Though during this period birthrates were declining throughout Western Europe, from the mid-1970s to the present, the French government distinguished itself from most other Western European governments by actively pursuing policies explicitly designed to encourage fertility (Gauthier 1993). Pronatalist rhetoric and new or expanded pronatalist initiatives reemerged as an important feature on the political landscape. The same groups of actors concerned with encouraging births in the first half of the century—natalists and familialists—instigated and actively supported a pronatalist revival that peaked in the mid-1980s and continues to influence political thought and action today. In addition to these groups, a broad range of social actors, from the far political right to the socialist left, joined a nationwide debate over France’s pronatalist policies.

Demographers and other intellectuals were the first to sound the clarion call. France was dying, committing “autogenicide” (Jobert 1976) or “collective suicide” (Fourastie 1979). Researchers from the prestigious National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED) published works such as Marianne’s Empty Cradles (Biraben and Dupâquier 1981) and France’s Tragedy (Dumont and Sauvy 1983). These works ranged from highly ideological polemics to more scientific demographic/economic studies arguing that the French welfare state would not be able to pay retirement and health benefits to its growing elderly population without a young work force (Teitelbaum and Winter 1985).8

The most important natalist organization was the Alliance Population et Avenir. This group lobbied for pronatalist policies and also produced demographic studies in order to disseminate demographic data in a language accessible to a broad range of people. As in the past, many of these pronatalists were relatively unconcerned with promoting any specific type of family. Thus, this group was generally not opposed to single parenthood or
divorce, and many pronatalists have also supported women’s right to choose abortion (Huss 1980).

Family associations, the descendants of the familialists of the late nineteenth century, continued to be associated with the pronatalist effort; these included, among others, the National Union of Family Associations and the Federation of French Families. Unlike the natalists, this group saw divorce, cohabitation, and single parenthood as morally undesirable and preferred to see larger families of a more “traditional” type. Although most did not want to deny women the right to participate in the paid labor force, many members of the numerous family associations believed mothers of small children should remain at home, and most oppose abortion.

During the 1970s, with fertility declining well below the “replacement level” of 2.1 children per woman, demographers, natalist organizations, and family associations agitated for governmental action to stimulate fertility. Policy makers and the public responded. An annual INED opinion poll asks people, “Are you in favour of state intervention in fertility matters?” Whereas, in 1974, 43 percent of those questioned answered “yes” and 49 percent “no,” by 1978, 59 percent said “yes” and only 29 percent responded negatively (cited in Huss 1980). By 1980, nearly all political parties and pressure groups (such as labor unions, employers’ associations, managers’ associations) supported renewing the pronatalist effort. The only groups that did not and do not support a pronatalist agenda were feminists, ecologists and some Marxists. Marie-Monique Huss (1980, p. 39) explained that all other groups had in common the beliefs “1) that the present decline under replacement level is a ‘bad thing,’ 2) that state intervention is called for, and 3) that appropriate measures will have some positive effect.”

Why have so many activists, politicians, and ordinary citizens believed that low fertility is undesirable? In her study of pronatalism in Israel, Nira Yuval-Davis (1989, p. 93) states, “Demographic policies often seem to be determined by worries over sufficient labour power for the national economy . . . A closer examination of national demographic policies (as well as welfare state policies), however, will reveal that national political rather than economic interests lie behind the desire to have more children, or rather, more children of a specific origin.” Political discourse in France appears to substantiate Yuval-Davis’ claim. While in official documents demographers and governmental officials stress economic issues, such as paying retirement and health care benefits of the elderly and ensuring a “youthful and vital” labor force, much of the less formal discussion centers on national power and retaining the “French” culture, language, and political heritage. C. Alison McIntosh (1983, p. 98) interviewed political elites and reports that, “invited to give their views of the long term economic consequences for the society, the persons interviewed . . . expressed themselves in vague and generalized terms in which national and international, economic and noneconomic aspects of power appeared to be fused.” In the following sections, I first examine how nationalist ideologies are linked to pronatalism in discourse surrounding pronatalism in general. Then I discuss how various political parties and interest groups sided when specific policies were discussed and instituted.

The General Debate: Pronatalism and Nationalism

The expansion of pronatalist benefits in the 1980s was closely linked to a general agreement on the part of the political left and right that pronatalist policies were important for “the nation.” This is clearly illustrated by politicians’ and activists’ public statements. For
example, Socialist François Mitterrand remarked, “[State] assistance for the second and then the third child represents for us a national duty.” Mitterrand’s minister of social affairs and national solidarity, Georgina Dufoix, proclaimed that “the French birth rate is altogether insufficient. We absolutely must have more children. . . . France’s place in western civilization and in the world is at stake” (both quoted in Bataille 1983, pp. 12–13). More to the political center, Giscard d’Estaing stated, “The biological future of the society in which our children and grandchildren will live depends on the family. If families do not fulfill their biological function of keeping alive the French population, if the number of our children no longer suffices to ensure the replacement of the elders by the young, our country will become weakened, enfeebled and dull” (quoted in McIntosh 1983, p. 82). The political right also claims to be strongly committed to pronatalist initiatives. Legislative deputy Jacques Barrot thus declared, “Sooner or later it will be necessary to find the financial means . . . to permit all families who want three or more children to freely decide to do so. It is the price to be paid for the survival of our society” (Journal Officiel, December 4, 1984, p. 6623). And on the extreme right, Jean Marie Le Pen (1984, pp. 94–96) wrote, “The family is the fundamental unit of the nation . . . France, with fewer than 50 million French inhabitants, remains an underpopulated country. She can only surmount this handicap with the institution of a vigorous pronatalist policy based on the promotion of the French family” (emphasis added in above quotes).

With almost the entire political spectrum, from extreme right to socialist left, claiming to support pronatalist policies out of concern for France as “a nation,” it is important to distinguish variations on this “nationalist” theme. What constitutes “the nation” for the various political groups? Public discourse linking pronatalism and immigration illuminates this question.

Debates over issues of race/ethnicity/national identity and pronatalism became heated in 1985, in response to a large-scale pronatalist propaganda campaign (for whom no pressure group or government agency claimed responsibility). The campaign consisted of huge bulletin board pictures in subway stations, on buses, and so on, showing a baby in diapers under which appeared the slogan “France needs children.” Soon after the appearance of this campaign, economist Alain Liptitz wrote an article for Le Monde (August 30, 1985) arguing first that, economically, France did not need children and, second, that the ads were racist. If France’s population needs to grow, why not admit more immigrants? “A nation,” claimed Liptitz, “can only be enriched, economically and culturally, by immigration.” This article sparked a flood of responses. Economist Guy Durand countered with his own article in Le Monde (September 13, 1985) arguing that, yes, immigration can be positive for a nation but that pronatalist policies were nonetheless vital. The reason, according to Durand, was that in order for two or more cultures to coexist peacefully within a country, a situation where the population of one culture is predominantly young and the other predominantly old must be avoided: “We will not see [a situation where] the youth of the south pay, over the long-term, the retirement benefits of old Europeans.” Paul Lambert, a professor of business administration wrote (Le Monde, September 13, 1985) that the pronatalist propaganda campaign was important in raising the consciousness of “the nation” on the subject of the “demographic problem.” He argued that “if there are millions of Indians, Pakistanis, Africans and Maghrebians, etc., who hope to immigrate to France, it is not to become French, which implies love of one’s country, respect for its rules, traditions, and customs, which can lead to sacrificing one’s life for defending it if necessary, but simply to live, which is completely different.” Letters to the editor argued that it was perfectly natural and acceptable for the “French” to want
to stay “French”; but according to some, this meant “white and European” and to others it meant “a marvelous multicultural society” (Le Monde, September 13, 1985).

Then, in October 1985 the Figaro Magazine ran a lengthy piece entitled “Will We Still Be French in 30 Years,” written by the prominent novelist Jean Raspail with assistance from demographer Gérard François Dumont. Raspail charged that the French government had engaged in “a conspiracy of silence” by not publicizing statistics showing relative size and growth rates of the “non-European” immigrant population in France compared to French citizens. He and Dumont thus systematically projected, with their own demographic formulas, the relative sizes of these populations and discussed what they viewed as the threat of the growing foreign population to French culture and society. Among the many future problems areas Raspail discussed were politics and elections, the army and religion. In elections, he claimed, the non-Europeans could easily be influenced by “religious and political forces” outside France. The army, Raspail argued, would be weakened because there would too few young French people to serve and foreigners (he even used this term to indicate children of immigrants born in France) would not have strong enough emotional ties to “la France” to make good French soldiers. As for religion, most of the foreigners were Muslim and were raising their children as Muslims. “A shadow is falling,” claimed Raspail, “on this old Christian country.” He referred to the former immigrant-sending countries of Spain and Italy (whose immigrants, decades prior, had been the subjects of intense anti-immigrant sentiment—Raspail conveniently neglected this) as “our Latin and Catholic sisters” (p. 130). In 2015, he contended, “France will no longer be a nation . . . She will be nothing more that a geographic space” (p. 129). Raspail argued in favor of government action to raise French birthrates as well as for closing the borders to immigrants and sending non-European immigrants back to their countries of origin because “. . . white nations, in free and developed countries . . . must somehow preserve themselves intact in the face of the multitudes from the third world . . .” (p. 132).

Though Raspail’s article represents an extreme position, it is indicative of the way some elites and activists have defined “France.” Their vision was (and continues to be) a community of white Europeans (Le Pen 1984). Intellectuals like Guy Durand, however, supported pronatalist policies for what they considered practical economic or social reasons. For Durand, admitting immigrants and encouraging births were not contradictions as they would be for someone like Raspail.

The above examples reveal that nationalist ideologies have indeed been a central part of the pronatalist debates. The feminist charge that “nationalism” is at the root of the pronatalist agenda is supported in the case of France in the 1980s. However, while all political sides claim to support “the nation,” the term is nebulous and means different things to different people. In fact, politicians and activists of varying political leanings support pronatalism for different reasons—all the while claiming that pronatalism is in the “national interest.” Thus, the conservative nationalists, who advocate a return to “better days” (and the days in which women’s main arena was hearth and home) comprise only one of several “nationalist” voices favoring pronatalist measures. The following section examines how different political parties and activist groups lined up when family policy underwent substantial alterations in the mid-1980s.

**Policy Institution in the 1980s**

In 1984, Socialist Minister Georgia Dufoix proposed long-awaited changes to the system of family benefits. She had already spearheaded several smaller alterations to family pol-
icy and advocated a “global” approach to encouraging people to have children that included urban planning to make living spaces more child-friendly and the establishment of a children and family institute whose goal was to disseminate information on family issues (Dufoix 1984).

The stated goals of the 1984 family policy changes were to simplify the system, encourage national solidarity, and stimulate fertility. Thus, under the new proposal, nine benefits were consolidated into one program, the Young Child Allowance, and a new benefit, the Parenting Allowance, was created. The Parenting Allowance was to be paid only to parents who had at least three children; the intent was to raise fertility by encouraging people to have a third child. Under its original formulation (it has since been altered), the Parenting Allowance was only to be available to those who had been recently employed and who chose, upon the arrival of the third child, to remain at home for up to two years. The language of the proposal was completely gender neutral, so either fathers or mothers could choose to leave the work force in order to care for their children.

Dufoix’s family policy passed the Parliament after intense debate, with most Socialist deputies voting, often somewhat grudgingly, in favor. The Socialists who, notably, represented most feminists and labor organizations were divided; those who went along with the proposal declared it could be altered in the future while other Socialist representatives rejected the plan for two main reasons. First, they saw in it a “mother’s salary”—carrying with it the danger of weakening women’s relationship to the labor force—which they had long opposed. Second, some deputies disliked the fact that not all employers were required to guarantee the jobs of employees taking the leave. In addition, some trade unions opposed the reduction of certain other allowances in order to finance the third child incentive (Herzlich 1984c; Journal Officiel, December 4 and 5, 1984).

The more conservative, “centrist” parties, such as the Union for French Democracy (UDF) and the Rally for the Republic (RPR, Jacques Chirac’s party), opposed Dufoix’s plan because it did nothing to encourage “traditional” family values (the family associations were aligned with these groups). During debates over the proposal, centrist deputies repeatedly argued that the way to encourage fertility was to encourage traditional families. This group also opposed Dufoix’s plan because it retained means-testing for some of the benefits. Though means-testing had been adopted during the 1970s, the mood of the centrists in the 1980s was against providing benefits according to income. They argued that this encouraged fraud. They also claimed that means-testing discouraged traditional family forms because people often retained eligibility by not marrying. Some centrists (including most business groups) opposed means-tested plans because they represented an attempt to distribute resources vertically, from more to less affluent, rather than horizontally, from those with fewer to those with more children. Finally, many centrists opposed Dufoix’s plan because the Parenting Allowance was only extended to “women” who had previously been employed outside the home (discussion was not always gender neutral even if the language of the proposal was). Some deputies argued that this discriminated against women who had opted for the traditional role of stay-at-home wife and mother (Journal Officiel, December 4 and 5, 1984). Although they claimed to be in favor of rigorous pronatalist efforts (indeed the most emotional calls for action to address “the tragedy of France’s demographic decline” etc., came from the right wing and centrist legislators during debates over Dufoix’s proposal), almost all centrist representatives voted against the plan. Of the centrists and conservatives, only a few Christian groups did support the proposal because they saw the beginnings of a stay-at-home mother plan which they favored (Herzlich 1984b).
In 1985, Chirac’s party (the Rally for the Republic or RPR) campaigned on a platform that included “five key measures for our liberties.” Supporting families by extending the period of paid parental leave for those with three or more children (an explicitly pronatalist step) was part of this platform; another part was limiting pronatalist family benefits to French nationals only; legal immigrants would be excluded. In addition, the RPR claimed it would see to it that children born to immigrants in France would no longer automatically be French citizens but would need to request citizenship as adults (see advertisement in *Le Monde*, October 6, 1985). In 1986 the centrist parties gained control of the legislature and a period of “cohabitation” ensued wherein France had a Socialist president, Mitterrand, and a centrist prime minister, Chirac.

In 1986, Chirac’s minister of health and family, Michèle Barzach (the new minister charged with overseeing family policy), reworked the family allowance system somewhat. The stated objective of Barzach’s plan was to spend the same amount of money as previously but deploy the funds in a different way (the final version of Barzach’s plan, however, added 1, 300 million francs to the family allowance system). Thus, parents with three or more children would receive greater financial allowances and others less (Taupin 1986a). The plan altered the Parenting Allowance so that a parent could remain at home for three rather than two years (thus parents who had left the labor force to care for a second child became eligible for this allowance, which had previously been reserved only for those who had been employed immediately prior to the birth of the third child) and raised the amount it paid (Herzlich 1986b; Taupin 1986a). To finance these changes, some family benefits were abolished or reduced. For example, Barzach’s program did away with special low interest loans for young families and moving allowances (“Conference” 1987). Most feminists vehemently opposed these changes, especially those pertaining to the Parenting Allowance, claiming that women’s relation to the labor force (and hence their economic autonomy) was even more threatened by this plan than by Dufoix’s program (Folloni 1986). Organizations representing the poor also opposed the changes, since the new plan reduced or ended some important benefits that helped the poor while expanding those that seemed more geared to the middle class. For example, certain family allowances continued to be paid until a dependent reached age sixteen but were extended until twenty so long as the child continued her or his education. While middle-class young people almost always continue their education until their early twenties, poorer teenagers often leave school in order to seek employment, causing their parents to forfeit the family allowance (La Gorce 1987). While family associations supported Barzach’s plan, many were disappointed that it was not as ambitious as they would have liked (the same problem they had with Dufoix’s plan).

Examining policy institution reveals that, strangely, the Socialists spearheaded the most explicitly pronatalist policy instituted in the 1980s, the Parenting Allowance. This is the opposite of what one might imagine would happen, based on both previous research and public debates and discussions in the French media. In addition, unlikely alliances were formed, such as when both Socialist and right-wing Christian parties supported the Parenting Allowance, albeit for different reasons. However, the Socialists’ pronatalist efforts were very different from what most right-wing politicians wanted and, indeed, during the period of cohabitation, a more traditional, “family-oriented” version of the family policy was formulated.

**FRENCH FEMINISTS AND PRONATALIST POLICIES**

The extent of the family benefit system—the monetary allowances as well as state-operated day care, long maternity leaves, and good health care coverage—is something that many
in the United States can barely imagine. Indeed, it may be difficult, from a U.S. perspective, to see what French women might ever have to complain about. Yet Evelyne Sullerot, a member of the High Committee on Population, stated in an interview that she viewed the pronatalist leanings of the political parties as “the most serious existing or potential threat to all that has been achieved by feminism over the years” (quoted in McIntosh 1983, p. 116). Feminist perspectives are largely absent from the mainstream press, but articles in the Marxist feminist magazine *Cahiers du féminisme* regularly complain about the direction of family policy (Bataille 1983; 1994; Folloni 1986; Granger 1984–1985; Rosehill 1984). Linda Hantrais (1993, p. 121) explains this in terms of French feminist theory: “Domestic production was identified as the seat of oppression and as the condition common to all women whatever their socioeconomic status. Within this perspective, forms of welfare which gave priority to the reproductive function of women could be interpreted as reinforcing existing gender relations and thereby contributing to oppression.”

Like feminists in other Western countries, many French feminists associate pronatalism with political conservatism and worry about renewed efforts to “send women back to the home.” Feminists have been especially critical of the Parenting Allowance because, in fact, it is usually women who stay at home to care for children (in 1993, 95 percent of those who collected this allowance were women), first because of “tradition” and, second, because men’s salaries are usually higher so it makes better financial sense for couples to forfeit the woman’s salary (Fagnani 1995). Claiming this allowance may take women off the career path and weaken their future earnings potential. Feminists and others argue that allowances that provide incentives for women to stay at home with children are actually adopted by the government to offset unemployment (Rosehill 1984; Bataille 1993; Fagnani 1995). Most French feminists would prefer to see state support for child-care facilities expanded. Mitterrand’s stated goal as candidate in 1980 was to “modernize” family policy, calling for nonpatriarchal family legislation with measures to help women combine parenthood and labor force participation (Jenson and Sineau 1995). However, according to Jane Jenson and Mariette Sineau (1995, p. 241), “Not only would family policy not be conceived to facilitate the lives of women active in the labor force . . . but women’s employment would be primarily understood in terms of the effects and consequences that it had on children and the country’s demographic situation.”

Pronatalist sentiment also stirs feminist concern with reproductive choice. The legalization of abortion in 1975 was one of the major accomplishments of the French feminist movement (Remy 1990) and most see pronatalism as a serious threat. Though not explicitly part of the French pronatalist program, contraception and (especially) abortion often enter the discussion. When the 1975 law legalizing abortion was passed, some deputies (representatives) supported it only under the condition that the government strengthen and expand family policy (Lenoir 1991). In 1984, Chirac (then mayor of Paris) argued for limiting the right to abortion, halting immigration, and encouraging births French babies all in the same newspaper interview (reproduced in “Jacques Chirac” 1985). In 1986, when the RPR came into power and Chirac became prime minister, right-wing legislators attempted to end health insurance coverage of abortion, which had been covered since 1981. The effort was blocked; however, the government promised to reopen discussion of the issue during debates on family policy; in other words, some government officials see family policy and abortion as closely related (Granger 1986). However, many, if not most, politicians and activists support pronatalist incentives and women’s right to choose abortion. For example, Simone Veil, the minister of health who crafted the legislation legalizing abor-
tion, supports pronatalist initiatives and has been quoted as saying, “. . . it is normal that, in the future, the French population should grow more and that of the rest of the world a bit less. That would make things a bit more equal” (quoted in Bataille 1994, p. 26). The Alliance Population et Avenir officially supports the right to choose abortion at the same time it encourages government-sponsored pronatalist incentives (Huss 1980). Since the mid-1980s, challenges to legalized abortion have come mainly from groups concerned with moral, not demographic, issues (McBride Stetson 1987). Politicians may hesitate to link abortion with pronatalism or family policy because legal abortion is so widely supported.

Some activist women have attempted to explain why family policy has failed to achieve any substantial increase in fertility and have prescribed alternative policy options. Florence Hugodot-Zeller (1986), for example, argues that policy makers have failed see certain realities; thus, they have instituted programs that will not succeed in raising fertility. Women, she claims, want the financial independence gained through labor force participation. In addition, they want the leisure time they would lose were they to have several children. Hugodot-Zeller claims that allocations to encourage women to stay home and have babies will not have the desired effect of raising fertility because women prefer to work outside the home. Policy makers ought to instead emphasize the father’s role in the family. Men, argues Hugodot-Zeller, should be encouraged to share the burden of household work, and both women and men should be encouraged to work part-time (“instead of always half time for madame”) when the children are small.

In a more academic realm, feminist scholarship has criticized the very demographic research on which pronatalists rest their case. Maryse Jaspard (1992, p. 11–12), for example, questions fundamental demographic concepts, such as replacement fertility (in French, remplacement des générations or generational replacement). Nearly all demographers use this concept and discuss policy in terms of it. Yet, according to Jaspard, the term “generational replacement” springs from “a biological and nationalist” conception of replacement and thus does not include immigration. Jaspard notes that the concept of generational replacement contributes to the idea of closed borders. If immigration is halted, then French women must assure “the identical reproduction of the population” (p. 13). Thus, the term “generational replacement” is inherently political; instead, Jaspard suggests using the concept of “population replacement” (remplacement de la population), which would include not only fertility but also immigration into the state.

While many (if not most) French feminists see a conflict between pronatalism and women’s rights, others, both in and outside of France, are less uniformly critical of governmental efforts to raise fertility. Because of concern with falling birthrates, policy makers have instituted generous family benefits. In addition, French women have some of the best provisions for maternity leave in Western Europe (Hantrais 1993). In general, French family policy has managed, compared with other states’ family policies, to help facilitate combining labor force participation and parenting; and women in France tend to have fewer interruptions in their work lives than women in other countries (Hantrais 1993; Lévy 1992).

Hantrais (1993, p. 136) argues that “the strong influence of pronatalism has remained such a dominant characteristic of the social security system, and more particularly of family policy, that it is only through their children that women can escape from the wage relationship.” Indeed, it is important to note that pronatalism has shaped family policy in ways not always favorable to women’s equity. However, for the questions central to this study, it is equally important to note that the family benefits system was instituted initially as a
mechanism to encourage births. Were it not for pronatalism, it is very possible that the family benefits would be less generous or even nonexistent.

CONCLUSIONS

Prior to World War II, some feminist groups sought to take advantage of the desire for a higher birthrate in order to gain rights and benefits from the state, and some researchers (e.g., Offen 1991) argue that French women ultimately gained from the pronatalist agenda in terms of social benefits. However, in recent decades French feminists have rejected pronatalism, viewing it as a threat to achievements such as reproductive choice and increased female labor force participation. In doing so, French feminists have indicated that they believe the possible gains in terms of family allowances or parental leaves are not worth the possible losses in terms of social and reproductive rights. The pronatalist policies instituted by the Socialists in the 1980s were disappointing to feminists who had hoped that family policy would cease to be linked to the birthrate (Jenson and Sineau 1995). However, the Socialists attempted to craft a policy that would encourage births while not overtly conflicting with women’s rights.

That being the case, what of the charge that pronatalism is the result of a conservative desire to reproduce “the nation” and its correlate, that women become “national reproducers,” valued mainly for their domestic role? The answer is somewhat mixed because, in France, both the political right and left have been concerned with reproducing the nation, but each imagines “the nation” differently (Anderson 1991). The critique that pronatalism is strongly linked to conservative nationalism certainly holds true in France. The conservative National Front, which has the support of 10–15 percent of French voters (Singer 1991), stresses women’s maternal role and openly favors policies that would foster “traditional” patriarchal family forms and outlaw abortion as a way of raising the birthrate of white Europeans. In the political center, many are antiabortion and pro-“traditional family” as well. The pronatalist ideology of these groups represents a threat to women’s economic and reproductive autonomy. In fact, as these groups have gained power in the late 1980s and 1990s the prochoice movement in France has come under greater attack (Forest 1995). Jenson and Sineau (1995) argue that, during the 1980s, the Socialists felt the need to respond to the population question because National Front leader Le Pen had made an issue of it; the feminist agenda then declined as the National Front gained ground. However, pronatalism has also been genuinely supported by many on the political left, and the Socialists, when in power, fashioned pronatalist policies to accommodate certain feminist goals.

What does the French case reveal about the question of whether women’s equity could motivate policies more broadly labeled “pronatalist,” such as increased government support for child care or parental leaves? While any answer must be speculative, the story of pronatalism in France indicates that women’s equity is not as powerful a force as the nationalist desire to increase fertility. In most cases where governments have instituted pronatalist policies there has been a strong nationalist motivation (Bracewell 1996; Hamilton 1995; Heng and Devan 1992; Yuval-Davis 1989). Nationalism can motivate the desire for higher birthrates as part of interstate competition or when certain groups within the state want to strengthen their numerical power (such as Le Pen’s National Front party, which wants to encourage births only to “white,” “European” French).
Heitlinger’s contention that women’s equity could serve as the basis for pronatalist measures is an attractive one. However, feminists have had to fight hard to gain rights that cost the government nothing (such as the right to abortion, legislation forbidding sex discrimination by employers, even the right to vote!), and most pronatalist incentives are quite costly. Nationalist ideologies, on the other hand, have served as a powerful impetus for policy implementation, in France and elsewhere. Embracing nationalist arguments in order to gain rights from the state may not benefit women. However, as witnessed in the French case, feminists, through consciousness-raising and by lobbying for programs and legislation to promote women’s equity and reproductive rights, may be able to influence the way policies are formulated, thus maximizing women’s economic, political and reproductive equity. In France, it seems, women have gained benefits from the state both because of and in spite of the pronatalist agenda.

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NOTES

1. It is important to note that, although the actual outcomes of policies may be slightly, or even significantly, different from the stated aims, the intent or motivation behind policy institution is critical because that is what generates political constituencies around a specific policy. The intent may also affect policy implementation.

2. This is a contentious area. Successive governments have chosen to provide stipends for people to hire in-home child care rather than expand state-funded day care; meanwhile, there exists a large unmet need for day-care centers (Granger and Vial 1986).

3. Translations of all French materials are by the author.

4. At the time of this writing, changes in the system are being negotiated at part of governmental “belt tightening.” Discussion of current policy debates falls outside the scope of this article.

5. There are about five francs to one U.S. dollar.

6. Most of France was occupied by the Germans during World War II; unoccupied France was controlled by a puppet government in Vichy led by Marshall Pétain.

7. Some feminists claim pronatalism is actually a reaction against women’s gains and immigrant workers (e.g., Bataille 1983; Brink 1983). Indeed, for some right-wing politicians and activists (e.g., Le Pen 1984), pronatalism means banning abortion and encouraging women to stay home with children to produce future French workers so that the country need not be dependent on immigrant labor.

8. Demographers’ statistics and projections have been important political tools. Herzlich (Le Monde, May 17, 1990) claims that demographic data have become an indispensable part of politics and have been used in many ways: (1) by insurers, to convince people of the inevitable collapse of retirement system, (2) by the political right, before their return to power in 1986, to seal an alliance with the familialists, (3) by the right and extreme right to justify new anti-immigration measures, and (4) by just about everybody to show the future difficulties in paying various benefits to the elderly population.
9. Raspail (1985, p. 124) states, “A true conspiracy of silence exists regarding this major problem, concerning the very survival of our identity, concerning the irreversible disequilibrium that threatens the French people and threatens the entire West confronted with the masses of the third world at our doors and inside our walls.”

10. Indeed, the nationality code was eventually changed so that children born to immigrant families in France are no longer automatically French citizens; they must apply for citizenship when they reach the age of eighteen.

11. This committee (it reappears regularly under slightly different names) has been charged with gathering information on population issues and reporting on various policy recommendations to the president.

12. When I use the term “feminist,” I am referring to any number of diverse perspectives, all of which advocate equality or equal rights for women but which may take different approaches to this goal.

13. In 1975, abortion was legalized for a “trial period” of five years. Legislation legalizing abortion more permanently was passed in 1979.

14. France is not unique in this respect. Other states, such as Sweden (Myrdal 1941), instituted family benefits systems as a way to increase fertility.

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