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Carol Blum, *Strength in Numbers: Population, Reproduction, and Power in Eighteenth-Century France*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. xiii + 261 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$44.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8018-6810-6.

Review by David Klinck, University of Windsor.

Carol Blum has written an intellectual history of the efforts of eighteenth-century populationist or natalist authors to free sexual desire and energy from traditional constraints resulting from the teachings of the Catholic Church. Montesquieu had spoken powerfully and persuasively, though mistakenly, in *Lettres persanes* (1721) on behalf of the idea that France's population level was in decline and that there was a desperate need to raise the birthrate. What Jean-Claude Perrot has called Montesquieu's "fertile error on depopulation"—France's population had long been in a state of equilibrium and was about to undergo an unprecedented expansion—produced enormous anxiety within French public opinion; it stimulated much research and thought on the subject of French depopulation and how to reverse it, until the 1790s when it became evident that France was having difficulty providing for the population she already had.<sup>[1]</sup> While recent French scholars have studied the populationist debate in terms of the development of economics, demography, and the administrative state, Blum has considered it with reference to sexuality, to what she believes were new sexual values or "new models of sexual behaviour" (p. ix): in effect a sexuality dedicated solely to reproduction and conducted within marriage.<sup>[2]</sup>

The author characterizes the sexuality appearing in populationist discourse in several ways. Hovering in the background throughout the book is a scientific, quantitative view of sexuality as a matter of numbers: the number of babies born set against the total number of Frenchmen. The *philosophes* in particular advanced an enlightened and liberal perception that prized the personal liberty to satisfy one's sexual desire free from artificial constraints. It was a perception that in this narrative largely disappears prior to the French Revolution. But what is depicted most strongly in this book is an understanding of sexuality, marriage, and reproduction shaped by an attraction to the power of the eighteenth-century state and public opinion as well as by masculinity and specifically patriarchalism.

Blum brings together a perception of power and sexuality in eighteenth-century France reminiscent of that of Foucault with the established feminist critique of patriarchalist masculinity in pre-revolutionary and revolutionary France. In her Foucauldian moments, the author represents many populationists as wishing to see sexuality liberated from the authority and discipline of the Church but subject to a state and a public possessing a passion for the scrutiny, regulation, and manipulation of sexual behaviour. These populationists were moved by the desire to denigrate all types of sexuality that did not foster reproduction within marriage and to exclude their practice as much as possible. The mainstream of populationism also functioned as an element in the cultural construction of gender. With Rousseau as a source of inspiration, many populationists contributed to a patriarchalist discourse of domesticity intended to push men into marrying and to identify women with reproduction and subjection to a male head of the household.<sup>[3]</sup>

In addition to studying the works of famous authors, Blum uses a large number of texts known in their

own time but little known or unknown since. Frequently it was minor writers who most fully and clearly brought out the implications of the idea of a sexuality devoted to reproduction. The *philosophes*, in contrast, often slipped lightly over contentious issues, such as the worthiness of divorce or polygamy, or treated them in an ambiguous manner.

Two introductory chapters dealing with the subject of depopulation anxiety in France—one treating the latter years of the reign of Louis XIV and one on Montesquieu’s provocative treatment of depopulation in *Lettres persanes*—are followed by three chapters on different proposals for raising the birthrate. These included curtailing celibacy and moving unmarried people into marriage, the legalization of divorce (for the purpose of fostering fertile marriages), and the introduction of polygamous marriage. A chapter on Rousseau forms the lynchpin of the book; the Rousseauian ideal of domesticity represented the mature expression of populationism and set the stage for what was to come after 1789. The final chapter in the book reveals the continuing presence of a bias in favour of a sexuality of reproduction among legislators of the revolutionary decade and its appearance in certain early revolutionary debates on the abolition of celibacy and the introduction of divorce. What should have been populationism’s culmination turned out to be its demise. During the revolutionary decade Frenchmen came to realize that France did not need a higher birthrate; the nation could barely provide for the population it already had.

The early chapters on celibacy and divorce go together because these two issues enabled populationists to target well-defined groups of people who were largely non-reproductive or perceived to be so. The chapter on celibacy presents some of the clearest evidence in the book of the tendency in populationism to denigrate unmarried people as a whole—including both lay and ecclesiastical celibates—and to pressure these people to marry. Towards mid-century François-Vincent Toussaint proclaimed that “whoever is so constituted as to be able to procreate his fellow being has a right to do so and must do so. This is the voice of nature” (p. 34). Toussaint’s statement of principle, in Blum’s words, “sums up the emerging ideology of values, conflating ‘natural rights’ and civic responsibility into one blanket imperative....‘Nature’ both confers reproduction as a *right* and commands it as a *duty*.” Certain later writers shared Toussaint’s liking for the exercise of close, even harsh control. Voicing the complaint, commonly made by populationists, that there were too many bachelors in France and that many of them engaged in “illicit” sex, the anonymous author of *L’Homme en société* devised a means of limiting their access to prostitutes so that they would be “forced to marry and have children” (p. 50). Prostitutes would be placed in government-run brothels where they and their customers would be subjected to public shame.

Those populationists who supported divorce did so primarily with the members of failed marriages in mind. Such marriages, it was generally believed, produced few if any children; populationists held that divorce would enable badly-married people to enter into a second, successful, fertile marriage. Populationist arguments on behalf of divorce, according to Blum, emerged “as the spearhead of a veritable strategic attack against indissolubility” (p. 67) in the most important pro-divorce movement prior to the French Revolution, that of the years 1768-1774.

The remainder of the book is marked by the feminist concern about the continuing presence of patriarchalism and misogyny in eighteenth-century France. The idea of marriage geared solely to reproduction, in combination with a male penchant for patriarchalism and misogyny, resulted in numerous expressions of belief in the naturalness of polygamy, as well as the widespread attraction to monogamous, Rousseauian domesticity. Support for polygamy appeared in the context of a national debate concerning whether monogamous or polygamous societies were more prolific. But supporters of polygamy were moved less by the desire to raise the birthrate than by male fantasies of maximizing sexual pleasure and exercising control over women. Blum claims that many writers across the century elaborated the notion of demoting women from their status as monogamous wives to that of members of a harem (p. 81). Similarly, Rousseau, ambivalent on the question of whether population increase was a good thing, was firmly moved by his own sense of himself as a male. In keeping with the established

feminist view of Rousseau as the arch-misogynist, his identification of women with reproduction and subservience to a male head of the household is represented as resonating with the feelings of so many men in the pre-revolutionary era.

Blum's perception of populationism from a predominantly feminist and Foucauldian perspective leads her to treat the revolutionary experience, even that of the first years, negatively or at best suspiciously.<sup>[5]</sup> She claims that during one of the Constituent Assembly's attacks on celibacy there was general agreement with the opinion voiced by a member that unmarried people were parasites and a useless weight on the face of the earth (p. 159); she points out that a motion in the Constituent Assembly in favour of obligatory clerical marriage was supported with the cry that there were 100,000 young women who had to be married (p. 158). Populationism's most long-lasting impact occurred with the ascendancy of Rousseauvian domesticity during Thermidor, when, in Madelyn Gutwirth's words, "the sole acceptable ideal for women" became that of wife and mother (p. 178), and in 1804 with the promulgation of the patriarchalist Napoleonic Code (p. 175).

Blum has produced considerable evidence that there was a great deal of debate in eighteenth-century France concerning the need to raise the birthrate and how to do it. But was there really something so coherent and distinct as a "populationist campaign?" Did not authors utilize the fear of population decline to advance some cause dear to them, such as the abolition of celibacy, on the grounds that if Frenchmen were to follow their advice the birthrate would rise? The fact many populationists themselves did not believe there was a national depopulation crisis, especially with the appearance of solid evidence beginning in the 1760s contradicting the notion (pp. 73-74), adds weight to this idea. In the divorce campaigns of 1768-1774 and 1789-1792, for example, pro-divorce authors did appeal to the belief that there was a need to increase the birthrate, but other goals were foremost in their minds. Blum claims mistakenly with reference to the divorce campaign from 1768 to 1774 that "populationism is presented as taking priority over all other values" (p. 71). The *Cri d'un honnête homme qui se croit fondé en droit naturel à répudier sa femme* (1768) was a patriarchalist work built around the argument that husbands should have the right to divorce adulterous wives and remarry so that they could have heirs of whose paternity they were certain, as well as the related argument that granting this right to husbands would help to bring "unruly" wives under control. The *Cri d'une honnête femme qui réclame le divorce* (1770), in contrast, promoted the idea that women should have the same right to divorce as men and that all people should have the liberty to leave a failed marriage and remarry happily. In the former work populationist discourse appears only rarely and then briefly; in the latter it plays a secondary role. When dealing with the divorce campaign of 1789-1792 Blum herself tacitly recognizes the importance of issues other than that of raising the birthrate. Concerning Albert Hennequin, the most influential pro-divorce pamphleteer of the period, she writes that "one senses that individual happiness and the moral integrity of the family were perhaps really closer to his heart" than demographic considerations (p. 168).

Also, this study would have benefited from the presence of an explanation in the introduction and the text of the salient characteristics of the new sexual values associated with the focus on reproduction. How and why did the efforts of so many writers to separate Frenchmen from Catholic teachings on sexuality result in visions of power and control at least as severe as those promoted by the Church? Blum could start by addressing the claims Foucault makes in the *Histoire de la sexualité* that sex became a public issue between the state and the individual or that the discussion of sexuality served the purpose of chasing away those forms of sexuality which were not strictly subject to the economy of reproduction.<sup>[4]</sup> Secondly, it would have been helpful if there had been some discussion of the construction of masculinity in eighteenth-century France.<sup>[5]</sup> Various bodies of evidence in the text, including the proposals for introducing polygamy, the condoning of male sexual violence within marriage, and the proposals that husbands leave the upbringing of children to wives and the state, suggest that many male writers were using populationist discourse to advance a harsher form of patriarchalism than had traditionally existed.

While it could profit from fuller analysis, this book represents a significant shift in the study of the eighteenth-century populationist debate—a shift away from a focus on the growth of the statistical sciences and state administration and towards a consideration of the history of sexuality and gender. Blum has provided a rich body of material and insights that will be utilized by historians of sexuality, gender, and the family in the future.

## NOTES

[1] Jean-Claude Perrot, “Les Economistes, les philosophes et la population,” in Jacques Dupâquier, ed., *Histoire de la population française*, vol. 2 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), p. 545.

[2] Studies of the response of eighteenth-century minds to the subject of the supposed depopulation include Perrot, “Les Economistes,” pp. 499-545; Hervé Hasquin, “Le Débat sur la dépopulation dans l’Europe des Lumières,” in Jean-Baptiste Moheau, *Recherches et considérations sur la population de la France*, E. Vilequin and H. Léridon, eds. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994), pp. 397-424; Jacqueline Hecht, “From ‘Be Fruitful and Multiply’ to Family Planning: The Enlightenment Transition,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 32, no. 4 (1999), pp. 536-551; Eric Brian, *La Mesure de l’état: administrateurs et géomètres au XVIII<sup>ème</sup> siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994); and James C. Riley, *Population Thought in the Age of the Democratic Revolution* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1985).

[3] Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). See especially the first section, “L’Hypothèse répressive.” Classic feminist statements on patriarchy and misogyny in Rousseau and in later eighteenth-century France include Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1988); and Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

[4] Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 1:37, 1:50.

[5] On this subject of the construction of masculinity in the eighteenth century see Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex. Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990); Elizabeth A. Williams, *The Physical and the Moral: Anthropology, Physiology, and Philosophical Medicine in France, 1750-1850* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class and Political Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989); Robert Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Jeffrey Merrick, “Masculinity and Effeminacy in the ‘Mémoires secrets,’” in J. D. Popkin and B. Fort eds., *The ‘Mémoires secrets’ and the Culture of Publicity in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 129-142.

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