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Review of Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820, by Susan E. Klepp

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SUSAN E. KLEPP

Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760–1820

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 312 p. \$65.00; \$24.95 (pbk.).

When did Americans first begin to consciously limit their family size? Which Americans were they, and what did they hope to accomplish by having smaller families? Susan Klepp offers remarkably specific answers to these questions, especially since she dates "the beginning of the decline at about 1763" (p. 10). She studies the few early American records that can be used to construct age-specific birth rates: 2,800 families that she and five other historians have reconstituted from examining genealogies and church records. She concludes that women in the "revolutionary era" (1760 to 1820) started childbearing later, stopped sooner, and had fewer children than married women in the "colonial era" (1680 to 1780): an urban TFR of 8.6 vs. 9.2, and a rural TFR of 9.0 vs. 9.7. In turn, the TFRs from the "nineteenth-century era" (1800 to 1870) were lower still: an urban TFR of 8.1 and a rural TFR of 8.4. These total fertility rates are notably high since they assume that all women married at age 20 and remained married until 50. Careful estimates by Coale and Zelnic (1963) cited by Klepp (p. 8) set the TFR for the US white population in 1800 at 7.04; their corresponding estimate for 1870 was 4.55.

The reconstituted families include 1,378 families living in rural Lancaster County, 744 families living in Philadelphia, 300 Jewish families living in cities along the eastern seaboard, 219 Quaker families living in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, 149 families descended from "wealthy colonial forbearers," and 29 free, Dutch-speaking families of African heritage living in New York and New Jersey. Klepp makes no claims that these families were representative of all American families, but she does use their fertility statistics to date the beginning of "family planning" in America and to contend, quite plausibly, that fertility fell "more rapidly in the East than in the West, in the North than in the South, among city folk before country folk," and among the "middling sorts" before the "very rich" (p. 265).

Although many demographers might find fault with the small non-random sample of Americans that Klepp uses to answer her "when" and "who" questions, they should persevere and read the interesting central chapters of the book, where Klepp answers the "why" question by examining almanacs, novels, letters, diaries, paintings, laws, and medical writings. In these sources Klepp finds evidence that the social and political upheaval brought about by the American Revolution profoundly affected how women thought about themselves, their relationship with their husbands, and their reproductive role. For example, in the political writings and personal letters of Esther Reed, Klepp finds a woman who linked political

independence with personal independence and the desire to limit childbearing. A resident of Pennsylvania, Reed wanted women to assume a public role in the new Republic as “treasuresses” who would collect money at the county, state, and federal level. She also wanted to have a smaller family: “I have fulfilled your wish of a son [her second child]. I wish I could stop with that number, but I don’t expect it” (p. 115). Her problems stopping are understandable considering the limited birth control methods available to women at the time, a topic covered in Chapter 5, and she did go on to have two more children before her early death in 1780. Hers was one of the new companionate marriages that Klepp describes as arising at the time. Reed’s husband had a like-minded desire for a smaller family and actually derided his in-laws for “going on in the old patriarchal Style begetting Sons and Daughters” (p. 115). It is with passages such as these that Klepp demonstrates how the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and pursuit of happiness affected women’s perceptions of marriage, childbearing, and their proper role in society. In Chapter 4, subtitled “Images of women,” Klepp moves into an area, art history, that has rarely been tapped for the insights it might offer for understanding fertility decline. Klepp reproduces numerous portraits of colonial women that emphasized their fecundity by presenting their full figures, often with outspread knees and bowls of fruit in their laps, as if they were cornucopias “pouring forth abundant wealth.” In contrast, women’s portraits from the revolutionary period hid their abdomens and legs, often with musical instruments and tables full of books, maps, and embroidery projects that emphasized their varied interests as individuals and downplayed their singular role as bearers of children.

Klepp’s answers to the when, who, and why questions of American fertility decline are certainly different from those found in the demographic literature. She thinks demographers focus too much on “men’s concerns over economic opportunity, the price of land, and intergenerational wealth flows” (p. 107), when their real focus ought to be a more “woman-centered one” that looks to “the density of women’s social networks that allowed conversation, debate, and novel linkages” to be drawn during a time of social and political upheaval (p. 283). Considering the provisional nature of much evidence of early fertility decline, her assessment of approaches that use such different sets of conceptual tools is perhaps too pat. But demographers have much to gain from reading the work of this investigator, who seeks to uncover what fertility decline looks like at the level of the individual woman. It is here, after all, where all fertility trends begin.

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