The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Debate on the Fertility Decline in the German Empire (1870~1918)

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1. Introduction

Although the “birth strike” came to attract widespread press coverage in Korea recently, it is needless to say that the birth strike is not a problem indigenous to Korea. Following France, which began to wrestle with its own fertility decline after her defeat in the Franco-Prussian war in 1871, other European countries were faced with this phenomenon. Among the European countries, it was none other than the German Empire which had to cope with the most severe fertility decline corresponding with its rapid industrialization and economic growth. This situation was best illustrated in the Berliner “Birth Strike Debate.”

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Two Berlin social democratic physicians, Dr. Alfred Bernstein and Dr. Julius Moses, came to the fore of public attention by espousing birth control at public meetings which were usually attended by large numbers of working class women. They proclaimed the right of women to control their own bodies and insisted that the working class could improve their social and economic conditions through birth control. In the sense that capitalism would come to an end if the working class restricted the number of “objects of exploitation” and “military recruits” by limiting their offspring, the doctors dubbed birth control “birth strike.”

Since their public meetings attracted wide attention, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) felt obliged to respond to the women’s initiative. The local party organization in Berlin arranged a meeting which took place in July 1913. The program of the meeting, entitled “Against the Birth Strike”, indicated the official party position. At this meeting which was attended by an audience of 3,500, the representative female activists of the SPD, such as Clara Zetkin, Luise Zietz, and Rosa Luxemburg, unanimously rejected the notion of “birth strike.” They believed that the emancipation of the working class could not be achieved through such an “individualistic” approach. Clara Zetkin insisted that the decline in fertility would lead to the decrease of not only soldiers for the capitalistic society of Germany, but also the numbers of revolutionaries. As the final speaker,

1) According to the statement of Ludwig Quessel, a representative from the Social Democrat, the German word ‘Gebärsstreik(Birth Strike)” is translated from the French term ‘grève des ventres’. It was invented by a French Malthusian Fernand Kolney. Ludwig Quessel, “Die Philosophie des Gebärsstreiks,” Sozialistische Monatshefte 25, 1913, p.1609.

Rosa Luxemburg proclaimed that the birth strike was a reactionary attempt to make the masses stupid, the organizers had no other choice but to close the discussion due to the strong opposition from female participants who accounted for 2,400 of the 3,500 participants.

Irrespective of the fact that birth control was so fiercely controversial within the SPD, the SPD was, along with the feminist movement, widely believed to contribute substantially to the fertility decline in Germany. J. Bornträger, the author of the official report, *The Birth Decline in Germany*, published by the Ministry of the Interior, pointed out that the SPD was an organization which spread information about contraceptive techniques that were fatal to the community (Bornträger, 1912: 108ff, 124f). Not to mention the Catholic Center Party which continued to espouse pronatalism, the representatives of the conservative parties frequently claimed that those regions supporting the SPD showed the lowest fertility rate.\(^{3}\)

After great attention had been drawn to the relation between the SPD and the fertility decline as seen in the public opinion during the German Empire, researchers paid scant attention to this issue. R.P. Neuman, (Neuman, 1978: 408-28) Ulrich Linse (Ulrich Linse, 1972: 205-71), and Anna A. Bergmann (Bergmann, 1983: 83-110) published articles which provided us the mosaic picture of the public debate on the fertility decline within the working class. Even though their articles dealt with the SPD policy toward the declining birthrate within the working class, many questions were not addressed. Why was the SPD ascribed as the main source of the declining birth rate, even though the SPD officially had no clear-cut position?\(^{4}\) In turn, why did the SPD not have consistent population and

\(^{3}\) *Haus der Abgeordneten* 128. Sitzung am 8. Februar 1913, p.10963, 10978.

\(^{4}\) The poem of Heinrich Heine clearly shows that socialists were believed to have destroyed
family policies, although the SPD was regarded as the Feminist party which was best illustrated in one of the most significant feminist publications of August Bebel, *Die Frau und Sozialismus* (The Woman and Socialism, 1879). In what sense and to what extent did the population policy of the SPD differ from that of other parties? Why was the declining birth rate viewed as a social question, not as the solution to social questions such as poverty and high mortality?

By answering these questions, we can understand how the debate on the falling birth rate was transformed into the arena of class struggle and how such an unprecedented phenomenon like birth control eventually came to be incorporated into modern German society. For that purpose, an overview of the population trend must be stated at the outset. Then, I will analyze why the fertility decline was mainly attributed to SPD policies. Finally, I will examine the ideological and practical approach of the SPD to the declining birth rate.

2. The General Fertility Trend of the Working Class and the SPD

The population actually rose throughout the German Empire. This can be traced back to the declining mortality rate which began in the 1880s. Between 1881 and 1900, Germany could boast an increase in the number of births from 1,700,000 to 2,000,000. This trend was reversed around the

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beginning of the 20th century, and by 1930 the birth rate had fallen to around 1,100,000 (Marschalck, 1984: 53-7).

Since there was no significant change in the age and rate of marriage, and the number of illegitimate children leveled off,\(^5\) it seems reasonable to assume that the decrease in the birth rate primarily resulted from the decline in marital fertility. The fertility rate, meaning the average number of children born to a woman over her life time, began to decrease from the beginning of the 19th century. This began first among the upper class, and then spread to the entire population in the latter half of the 19th century. The women born between 1865 and 1900 on average gave birth to two children, whereas the previous generation gave birth to five children.\(^6\) As Wolfgang Köllmann well expressed, “It was not the number of families, but the size of each family that was reduced” (Köllmann, 1959: 384). J. Bornträger stated in the aforementioned official report commissioned by the Ministry of the Interior that all experts came to the conclusion that marital contraception underlay the fertility decline (Bornträger, 1912: 36 (662)).

The decline in national fertility was an issue which afflicted all European countries as well as the US. It was not only France which began to wrestle with that question since her defeat in the war against highly populated Germany, but also the UK began to show a lower rate of fertility than

\(^5\) Nevertheless, the proportion of illegitimate children in Germany amounted to 9%, which is higher than other European countries. For a detailed examination of this point, see Cornelie Usborne, “Pregnancy is the Woman’s Active Service”, Pronatalism in Germany during the First World War,” in Richard Wall et. al.(ed.), The Upheaval of War: Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918(Cambridge University press, 2005), p.390.

\(^6\) There is an abundance of literatures showing such statistics. For reference, see Peter Marschalck, Bevölkerungsgeschichte Deutschlands im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), pp.53-7.
Germany. Thus, Corneline Usborn is correct in claiming that it was not the fertility rate itself, but the change in the demographic rate that aroused such fear in German political circles. The report of the ministry of the Interior to the Prussian Diet reads: “In 1876 we had reached the peak of 40.9 live births per 1,000 inhabitants. This rate has declined to 28.2 by 1912. France took seventy years to lower her birth rate per 1,000 by 8%, we needed only twelve years.”

Such statistics inevitably prompted a massive debate among politicians, doctors, sociologists, and feminist activists. Since the population size used to be viewed as a major index of national pride and power, the steady decline in birth rate seemed to jeopardize the entire society. Around the turn of the twentieth century and in the decade immediately prior to World War I, a period which was ridden with intense imperialistic competition, the discussion assumed a more urgent note. The growing awareness of a continuous decline in the birth rate resulted in the prolific publications of pamphlets, dissertations, essays, and newspaper articles which explained the meaning of this changing fertility pattern and searched for measures to bring that trend to a halt.

Researchers provided varying opinions with regards to the decline in the birth rate. The proposed causes were complex: the ban on child labor depreciated the economic value of the children; the roles of the church and

7) At this juncture, French and American societies showed contrasting attitudes toward the birth rate drop. The American women’s organization came to the fore in this issue, whereas the French feminists seemed to be subject to the conservative politicians, For a more detailed discussion of this, see Alisa Klaus, “Depopulation and Race Suicide: Maternalism and Pronatalist Ideologies in France and the United States,” in Seth Koven et, al., Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.188-212.

8) Cited in Cornelie Usborne, “‘Pregnancy is the woman’s active service’. Pronatalism in Germany during the First World War,” in Richard Wall et, al,(ed.), The Upheaval of War, p.390,
religion had been reduced. In addition, the spread of contraception was frequently mentioned, but it is needless to say that contraceptive devices were the symptom of the voluntary limitation of numbers of children, not its cause.

Behind all of these discussions, there lurked questions about the role of the SPD in the fertility decline. Hans Rost, a Catholic demographer wrote, “Social Democracy, with its materialistic-atheistic world-view, strives first of all for the material advancement of its supporters through the propagation of birth control.”\(^9\) In the debates held in the Reichstag (German Imperial Diet), many representatives asserted that the SPD was responsible for the declining birth rate.\(^10\) A representative of the National Conservative Party, Wilhelm von Knigge, emphasized the correlation between the SPD and the birth rate on the grounds of statistics. While the average number of live births per 1,000 inhabitants in Germany was 31.9 in 1907, that of Berlin amounted to 23.9. In this sterile Berlin, the SPD won 66.2% of the vote. On the other hand, regions with fewer supporters of the SPD, so his argument went, produced higher birth rates. The birth rate of Brandenburg with 9% of the SPD votes amounted to 39.7%. The same could be said of Posen, which had 38.5% of the birth rate and 7% of the SPD votes,\(^11\) It is not difficult to find the same arguments repeated in the protocol of the German Imperial Diet.

Such an argument can be easily nullified. First, there can be many

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other regions with high birth rates and a low number of votes for the SPD. Second, it was a leap in the logic to draw a line between workers' support for the SPD and the responsibility of the SPD for the low fertility rate among the workers. Actually, the SPD did not provide any consistent and sophisticated population policy. In fact, it was the Neo-Malthusians who ardently supported birth control. They insisted that a society with a high quality of life and small population was better than that with a low quality of life and large population. Accordingly, they opposed unchecked population growth like the Malthusians, but unlike the Malthusians who emphasized moral restraints such as abstinence and delayed marriage, they showed enthusiasm for contraceptive techniques.  

By 1909, Ferdinand Goldstein, a representative German Malthusian, dared to insist on the legalization of abortion (Linse, 1972: 232). Established in 1911, it was indeed the Deutsche Neumalthusianer Komitee (German Neomalthusian Committee), that attempted to spread information about contraceptive techniques along with “Bund für Mutterschutz (Organization for the Maternity Protection)” and “Die Deutsche Gesellschaft zur Bekämpfung von Geschlechtskrankheiten (German Society for the fight against venereal disease).” Interestingly, they were seldom mentioned in the Reichstag debate.

Nonetheless, the accusation of the birth strike against the SPD was not completely misleading. The reason why the birth strike was often attributed to the SPD and not to its actual ardent supporter, the Neo-Malthusians, was because the fertility decline which had already begun among the upper

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12) The first British Neo-Malthusian organization was formed by C.R. Drysdale in 1878. This organization maintained the basic premise that overpopulation was the main source of poverty, crime and disease. However, it insisted that overpopulation could be prevented, not by evading marriage or marrying late, but by practicing contraception.
classes had reached the working class. Persistent government and media declarations of crisis stemmed mainly from the declining birth rate among the working class.

Berlin presented empirical evidence to support that perception. The birth rate in the urban area was far lower than that in the rural area, and the city which showed the lowest fertility rate was Berlin. A couple of the representative in the German parliament suggested that the fertility rate in Berlin was lower than that of Paris which was notorious for that issue. Before 1900, the residential area for the upper class showed the lowest birth rate in Berlin. At the turn of the 20th century, the decline in the fertility rate was observed in the worker’s residential zone and the birth rate continued to decline at a more appalling rate between 1906 and 1911 (Linse, 1972: 218). The family limitation, which had been thought of as the preserve of the upper classes, now seemed to infect the lower classes.

The survey of O. Polano, a professor of Gynecology in Würzburg, validated the aforementioned statement. The survey involving 500 women confirmed that 67%, or 311 out of 500 practiced conception control. The group which showed the highest rate of contraception usage was the civil servant family: 81% of them responded “yes” to the question about contraception. 71% of the industrial laborers’ wives and 69% of the craftsmen families used contraception, whereas only 48% of the peasant wives practiced birth control. The birth statistics in Berlin during the period

13) Haus der Abgeordneten, 122, Sitzung am 31, Januar 1913, p.10449. At that time, the experts began to insist that not the births per 1,000 of the population, but the number of births per woman should be valued statistically, because it was absurd to make a comparison between Berlin where there was a high proportion of young male workers on the one hand, and East-Prussia where the traditional family structure was maintained on the other hand.
between 1886 and 1894 illustrated the inverse relationship between income level and birth rate (Niggemann, 1987: 261). In short, the key to discourse related to the low birth rate was the fact that the working-class women were joining the wives of the upper echelons of society by consciously limiting the size of their families.

Why was the declining birth rate among the working class interpreted so negatively? Was that the only way to look at the fertility decline? An article published in the newspaper of the Berlin Metal workers poignantly observes the contradiction in the contemporary debate as follows:

"The thousands or even hundreds of thousands of the upper echelons had limited their family size a long time ago, but it was viewed as the meaningful result of their mental and moral superiority over the sexual drive and intemperance of ordinary people. However, as the people began to follow the good precedence of the upper class, they suddenly began to see birth control and the fertility decline from a completely different perspective, and searched for measures to stop birth control and raise the birth rate, at least among the majority of the people." 14)

As this excerpt explicitly shows, evaluating the declining birth rate negatively and attempting to halt this trend were not the only way to face this new phenomenon. In fact, the fertility decline could have been positively viewed as a part of the process of modernization, at least to a certain degree, as it used to be with that of the upper class. That possibility was almost ruled out. In that sense, Neo-Malthusianism was an exceptional case. In many cases, the conflicting issue in the public debate was merely how to bring it to an end rather than how to evaluate it. The prevailing

view regarding the low birth rate itself reflects the fierce class conflict that occurred within the German Empire. Rather than examining the cause of the fertility decline closely and proposing a comprehensive social welfare program to ease the miserable condition of the working class and to boost population, the SPD was blamed. Defining the fertility decline negatively in the absence of close examination and using this trend as a weapon against the SPD just because the working class began to adopt contraception, is an episode which clearly shows the fierce class conflict within imperial German society. In short, the social debate over the declining birth rate constituted part of the class conflict.

3. The Social Democratic Policy on Birth Control

1) Ideological Approach of the SPD toward the Fertility Decline

What brought the working class to limit the use of birth control? Contrary to the expectation of conservative politicians, the SPD did not have a definitive position on birth control. Population and family policies were not central to German socialists. Among the leaders of the SPD, Karl Kautsky showed an exceptional interest in population growth. He asserted, “There can be no solution to the social question without dealing with the population issue.” He went on to say, “Whatever the social structure is, every society will face the moment in which crop yield decreases and the ghost of overpopulation haunts them.”

changed his attitude and seemed to downplay the significance of demographic changes. In an article published in the Neue Zeit in 1911, he wrote, “Overpopulation is not the question about which we should feel concerned and it would be better to entrust this issue to our descendants.”

Quite naturally, even his son, Dr. Med. Karl Kautsky, commented that his father had no clear position on the effect caused by the fertility decline (Kautsky, 1924: 23).

Thus, quite understandably, Erich Unshelm described in his work entitled “Birth Control and Socialism” in 1924 that the population problem was an “illegitimate child” in the socialist terrain (Unshelm, Introduction). Marx himself argued that the population problem was intrinsic to capitalism, not to socialism. He believed that income level was in inverse proportion to the birth rate. Poverty and malnutrition promoted growth in population, while improvement in nourishment levels and social welfare reduced the birth rate. Accordingly, the disaster of a Malthusian trap in a socialist society could not occur. While in the process of debating with the former Malthusian Kautsky, Engels expressed his idea on the fertility issue in a vague manner. In a letter to Kautsky, he wrote that he was not absolutely against the idea of birth control, but that “this kind of decision should be entrusted to the descendants.” He did not believe in political and theoretical solutions to the population problem. Instead, he defined it as “a private thing between a man and a woman.”

Even August Bebel, the very politician who published the Bible of socialist women, did not have a clear-cut position on this issue. On the one hand, he pointed out that the “intellectual and energetic women were inclined not to have a large number of children and

did not want to spend their best years in pregnancy. On the other hand, he did not want to recommend contraception, saying, “In a natural society, the quantitative regulation of the population will be accomplished without detrimental abstinence and without unnatural contraception.” With this statement, he tried to emphasize “natural abstinence.”

Unlike these socialist theoreticians, the representative Social Democratic leaders like Wilhelm Liebknecht and Ferdinand Lassalle had fairly negative attitudes toward birth control. Liebknecht thought of contraception as immoral and reprehensible, and Lassalle had sought to prohibit contraceptive devices.

It was the Social Democratic doctors who came into frequent contact with the workers that adopted the most active attitude toward birth control. In fact, it was partly due to their remarkable activity that the SPD was condemned for playing the leading part in the fertility decline. Dr. Fritz Brupbacher published his widely mentioned pamphlet entitled *Blessing of the Children-No End?* It is believed that this book first introduced the term “birth control” into the German-speaking world. His ideas were based on the premise that the misery of the working class stemmed from their great fecundity. Not only for eradicating poverty in the working class, but also for the freedom and self-realization of women, so argued Brupbacher, birth control was an indispensable part of working class life. However, he did not proceed to insist that the SPD should set out to promote birth control. Instead, he came to the conclusion that there was no reason for the SPD to actively take part in the debate on the fertility decline because the discussion about it stemmed from the concern of the State and the ruling class about whether they could secure a sufficient number of soldiers to maintain the military.
The representative Social Democratic doctors that continued to participate actively in the campaign for birth control were Alfred Bernstein and Julius Moses. Their medical practices in Berlin’s workers’ area brought them into contact with large numbers of working class patients, and their eyes were opened to the miserable reality of the working class. Bernstein proclaimed the right of women to control their own bodies because the misery of the working class was, in his opinion, caused mainly by their high fertility. In a public speech delivered in March 1913, Bernstein named birth control as the “measures for the emancipation of the working class” along with general strike. In a pamphlet entitled How to Promote Birth Control Culturally, he wrote, “The power of the workers lie ’in their sexual organ,” and “Working class women will be crowned with a laurel wreath when they refuse to function as a child-bearing machine.” He added that the birth strike would bring capitalism to its knees (Männerverein, 1914).

Julius Moses, a Jewish doctor, was more moderate. Moses believed that birth control was not the means for revolution, but rather a “remedy” which could contribute to the health of the proletariat. He insisted that limiting family size would be inevitable for the working class to enjoy life worthy of the name of “life.” In a manuscript written for a lecture in 1913, he wrote, “Birth strike means... to give birth to no more children

17) Julius Moses, born in 1868, was the medical health policy speaker for the parliamentary group of the Social Democrats in the Reichstag from 1920 and 1932. In the summer of 1942, he was deported to the concentration camp in Theresienstadt and died there in the same year. Contrary to the main stream within the SPD, Moses had long pointed to the injustice that only the women from privileged backgrounds could control their number of children. Thus, he endeavored to liberalize abortion law, because he firmly believed that abortion could not be handled by the penal law. For detailed information about Moses, see http://www.fes.de/archiv/adsd_neu/inhalt/newsletter/newsletter/NL\%202006/NL\%2001\%202006/html12006/moses.html

than people would be able to feed and educate to some degree in such a miserable economic condition as well as in rising unemployment... one can refer to it as emergency action.”

Before 1913, the declining birth rate was not listed as the main interest of the SPD. It was not until a public meeting inspired by the series of public lectures given by Moses and Bernstein in 1913 that the journals affiliated with the SPD began to analyze the fertility decline among the working class by publishing a series of articles. The most notable one was written by Ludwig Quessel.

Ludwig Quessel, a delegate of the Reichstag, publicly rejected birth control in one of two articles published in *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, the most important organ of the SPD competing with *Die Neue Zeit*. The first article entitled “The Economics of the Birth Control” began with the sentence, “The ghost named birth strike is wandering.” In this article, he argues that the Neo-Malthusians only “ascribed the social question to the bed of the working class.” According to his estimation, all of European society and the capitalist system would come to an end if a one-child system would take root among the proletariats. His diagnosis took even a nationalistic tone, saying that the number of Asian immigrants would increase in order to fill the empty labor market. He said that this was already proven in the Eastern Prussian provinces where populations migrated en masse to large cities like Berlin and were substituted by a large number of Polish and Russian immigrants. Finally, he wrote that the declining birth rate would mean a dangerous reduction of German military power and the fight against the birth strike was, in the first place, the battle for national existence (Quessel, 19). Cited in Kurt Nemitz, “Julius Moses und die Gebärsreik-Debatte 1913,” *Jahrbuch des Instituts für Deutsche Geschichte* 2. Band, 1973, p.325
1913a: 1319-25). In his subsequent article entitled “The Philosophy of Child Birth,” he criticized that the support for the birth strike was based on the premise that it denied the value of working class life. “The philosophy of birth control,” said Quessel, “denied not the value of life as a whole, but the value of the proletarian life.” Although he did not forget to mention that the naivety of proletarian sexual life had disappeared irretrievably and new sexual philosophy and morals had become necessary, he hoped that through the optimistic world view of socialism the decline in fertility could be interrupted (Quessel, 1913b: 1609-16).

Among the leading politicians within the SPD, it was exceptional that Eduard Bernstein advocated birth control through discussion held in the journals affiliated with the SPD. By saying that a large number of children did not suit modern furniture, he expressed his opinion that birth control will be an essential part of modern life (Bernstein, 1913: 1494).

Although there was controversy over whether birth control was desirable or not, even those against birth control agreed that the choice of family limitation was a private one which should not allow governmental intervention. This position supposedly came from August Bebel’s idea that an individual’s sexual life is an inviolable privacy in which no third party can intervene or judge. The SPD’s attempt to remain faithful to this guideline will be explained later.

With regards to the internal debate within the SPD on fertility, it is quite conspicuous that the discussion was not led by women. Not until the collapse of the German Empire in 1918 did German women appear as a meaningful variable on the political scene. Against this background, even the SPD which was far more advanced than any other political party in terms of the theory on the gender issue, was no better than other parties
in their practical approach to the policy for women. There was a women’s organization affiliated with the SPD, but this Social Democratic women’s organization was separated from the SPD because of the Reichsvereinigungsgesetz, The Imperial Law on Assembly which ordered the dissolution of political organizations with female members. Since this law effectively kept women from directly joining the SPD, the Social Democratic women’s organization could enjoy its sovereignty. It was Clara Zetkin who dominated the women’s party of the SPD. Her famous colleague, Rosa Luxemburg, rarely showed interest in the gender issue, while her competitor, Lily Braun, was virtually driven out of the SPD by Zetkin by 1907. Thus, understanding the position of Clara Zetkin is key to explaining the family policy of the SPD.

Clara Zetkin viewed birth control as a medical issue. She insisted that it was the concern of the individual person, thus it could not be incorporated into the party program. Basically, she was against family limitation. The birth strike was not desirable to her because it aimed at the emancipation of individual families, not the proletariat class in general. In addition, birth control would hurt the Socialist Democratic party because its use would result in not only fewer soldiers for the state, but also fewer fighters for the socialist revolution. She even alleged that birth control originated from selfishness. In a letter to Kautsky, she insisted that birth control would be “favorable to the selfish egoist who wanted to enjoy the pleasure of life as much and as easily as possible.”

In the process of debating with working class women, her arguments became more moderate; she was no longer

20) The rivalry between Lily Braun and Clara Zetkin is well-known. For an account of their conflict, see 문수현, 「작은 진보, 작은 개혁의 사회주의자」, 최재인 외, 「서양 근대 여성들 근대를 달리다」(서울: 푸른역사, 2011), pp.96-123.
opposed to the limitation of the family, but instead to making the birth strike as the “means of the revolution.” In the end, she learned to step back from her hard-line position against family limitation and began to insist that birth control was a private matter, and it would be better not to make such an individual concern a part of public enterprise. This attitude is not surprising if we consider that Clara Zetkin intended to put priority on class conflict rather than women’s emancipation.

“Clean division” was the motto that characterized Zetkin’s policy toward the contemporary bourgeoisie women’s movement. Thus, a number of suggestions from within the middle class women’s movement such as family allowance which could have contributed to the increasing the birth rate were not sufficiently discussed. Wally Zepler published a short article in the *Sozialistische Monatshefte* in order to emphasize the necessity of introducing comprehensive social support for both children and the mother, but there was no serious response to it. The useful proposals from female Social Democrat, Lily Braun, such as paid vacation before and after delivery, could not be incorporated into the party program (Bock, 1994: 409). Unfortunately, Lily Braun, the one who paid sufficient attention to the practical aspects of working class women and proposed numerous reformative measures such as maternity funding, public kitchens, etc., had no say in the SPD.

As a whole, the SPD chose to neglect the issue of birth control. Naturally,

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22) *Vorwärts* 24.8.1913, 1.
there was a great difference between the SPD which considered birth control as a private matter on the one hand, and the conservative parties which regarded the body of a woman as part of an organic society and thus tried to prohibit birth control on the other. However, they bore a striking likeness. That is, both did not pay sufficient attention to the reality of the women. R.P. Neuman indicated that the SPD's indifference toward women was much more surprising, given the fact that the SPD provided various comprehensive programs for the education of the working class. He analyzed that the SPD showed a tendency toward making distinctions between ordinary life and socialist ideology, especially with regards to sexuality.\(^{25}\) This tendency was strengthened by Clara Zetkin and the women's organization of the SPD which put priority on class conflict rather than the issues specific to women. In response to the Social Democratic Party's negligence toward their central issue, the women began to fill the auditorium for the birth strike debate, or silently continued to practice contraception.\(^{26}\)

2) The Debate Over the Declining Birth Rate in Parliament

There could have been various means to stimulate the birth rate. Improvement in the welfare system, such as tax relief for large families, better housing conditions and substantial maternity protection, could have been feasible solutions to the demographic crisis. Instead, German parliament chose to impose legal sanctions against birth control. In addition to paragraphs 218-220 of the German criminal law enacted in 1872.

which prescribed penal servitude for any woman who had an abortion and for any person aiding its practice, the civil code adopted punitive measures to protect the family and stimulate population growth. Paragraph 184.3 of the civil code outlawed the advertising, display, and publicizing of contraceptives as objects intended for ‘indecent’ use, although selling or manufacturing contraceptives was not forbidden. There were repeated attempts to strengthen these laws. In 1910, the Reichstag tried to prohibit or limit the trade of goods used for abortion. Again in 1913, the Reichstag attempted to prohibit articles related to abortion and pregnancy by enacting article 56 of the trade act. Given the fact that the French debate on the fertility decline resulted in positive measures to raise the birth rate, such as the support for large families and maternity law, such a negative approach

27) According to this law, those who actually practiced abortion or tried to abort could be sentenced to a maximum of five years in prison. Those who provided the means to abort or assisted the facilitation of an abortion could be punished by imprisonment for not more than 10 years. In the years preceding World War I, the penalty was strengthened: compared to 411 persons in 1900, 1755 persons were convicted in 1914.

28) This bill was blocked, not for the sake of women’s interests, but for the benefit of the chemical industry. Martin Faßbender, a representative of the Catholic Center Party, opposed this bill, because its ambiguous wording could lead to the repression of the chemical industry. Ernst Müller, a representative of the “Freisinnige Volkspartei (Liberal People’s Party)” said that the bill was “vague and extensible.” For a more detailed discussion on this, see Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages 12, Leg.Per., 2. Sess., Sitzung vom 30.11.1910, Bd.262, pp.3278-308.

29) After the outbreak of World War I, the declining birth rate became a more serious social problem. In the midst of World War I, the Reichstag continued to wrestle with this issue through preventive measures. As a result, a series of penal laws were enacted to prohibit contraception, rather than to promote childbirth. These laws included articles which made public the identity of the aborting women in addition to the ban on the production and sales of contraceptives. The reason for these was because the preventive measures were, as the chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg clearly indicated, expected to lead to instantaneous result. In addition, the penal law was “cheaper” and “easily applicable,” After the defeat of Germany in World War I these laws were abolished. This was partly due to the feminist movements in Weimar Germany.
to the birth strike could be interpreted as German methodology.  

Whereas the French Social Catholics devoted themselves to finding a solution for the housing problems of poor families in the big cities, the German Catholic party repeatedly proposed laws for punishing the aborting women and their helpers.

Why did German parliament choose to resolve the fertility decline by wrestling with the symptom, and not by fighting the disease itself? At this point, it is necessary to examine closely how this issue was addressed in the Reichstag, the German parliament during the German Empire, on the verge of World War I. Central to the Reichstag debate about the fertility decline was the question of what caused this phenomenon. The conservative politicians asserted that the low birth rate could be ascribed to immorality or the spread of contraceptive devices, considering the fact that

30) In the years before World War I, the French feminists promulgated the “strike of the womb” and suggested raising funds for motherhood. As a result, the Engerand Act which protected women from being dismissed before and after maternity leave was enacted in 1909. In 1912, the law to support illegitimate children was passed, and the maternity benefit was introduced through the Strauss Act in 1913. For further information about the French approach to motherhood, see Min, You-Ki, “Social Solution to ‘Greve des Ventres’ and ’National Suicide’: The Origin of Family Protection Policy in France,” 시녀사론(Western History Review), Vol. 89, 2006, pp.143-77. After maternity leave was legalized in 1878 and the modest maternity benefit for uninsured workers was introduced in 1883, there was no further achievement in Germany until the end of World War I. At that point, both countries switched their positions: France tried to enact a strict law to regulate abortion in 1923, while Weimar Germany sought to develop positive measures to encourage an increase in the birth rate. Insured women were granted maternity benefits starting in 1919. Furthermore, the ILO Convention which included six weeks maternity leave, maternity benefits, and free insurance was first ratified in Germany. For a more detailed discussion of this, see Gisela Bock, “Poverty and Mothers’ Rights in the Emerging Welfare States,” in G. Duby et.al,(ed.), A History of Women, V. Toward a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp.402-32. For information on the Chinese debate over population policy, see Shin, Kyuhwan, “Eugenics Discourse and Racial Improvement in Republican China(1911-1949),” Korean Journal of Medical History 19, 2010, pp.459-86.
the economic condition of the working class in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had improved in comparison with that of preindustrial society.\(^{31}\) The Catholic Center Party in particular linked the low birth rate to the decay of morals and concentrated on the prohibition of contraceptives devices. Heinrich Gerlach, a representative of the Catholic Center party, suggested that in addition to “strengthening the religious faith and restoring the love of children,” the government should “ban the sale of contraceptive devices.”\(^{32}\) The representatives from the Center Party generally tended not to ascribe the low birth rate to the defects of the social system. For instance, a Catholic representative, Georg Schwarz, contended that the poor economic condition did not lead to the birth decline because the very social strata that suffered from poor housing conditions most seriously did not produce the lowest birth rate. He insisted that the low birth rate could only be resolved by restoring Christian values.\(^{33}\) Such a moralistic approach was widely shared by other conservative parties. Becker, a representative from the National Liberal party, claimed that the advertisement for the sale of contraceptives was an “ominous sign” and it was necessary to “fight against these most fiercely.”\(^{34}\) Friedrich Werner from the Wirtschaftliche Vereinigung (Party for the Financial Circles) stood against the SPD which connected bread price to the declining birth rate. According to Werner, it was not the low-income bracket, but rather the high-income bracket that

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31) Related to this point, Wally Zepler indicated that people began to regulate family size after they got out of absolute poverty. Only after attaining a certain standard of living could people dream to raise their children in a more respectable way. Wally Zepler, “Frauenbewegung,” p.1645.
were the most ardent defenders of contraception.\footnote{178. Sitzung vom 29. November 1913, p.6086.}

Although the fertility decline was a controversial issue within the SPD as I stated in the previous chapter, the representatives of the SPD did not blame the aborting women. They viewed the fertility decline as having originated from the impoverishment of the working class. A Social Democrat, Heinrich Ströbel even asserted that family limitation was acceptable as long as the urban housing condition was not suitable for a family of three to four, the working class mother could not breastfeed, and 1/3 of the infants died before their first birthday.\footnote{128. Sitzung am 8. Februar 1913, p.10982.} The arguments that the majority of the population did not have the means to develop and maintain physical and mental power for childrearing, or that the fertility decline was the result of high-priced daily necessities\footnote{92 Sitzung vom 16. Januar, 1913, p.3017.} were redundant in the Reichstag debates.\footnote{183. Sitzung vom 5. Dezember 1913, p.6208.}

A Social Democrat, Wilhelm Dittmann, vividly described the painful reality of the working class, saying that the hopeless economic struggle for the people's survival was reflected in the fertility decline. Since most people did not know how to feed and raise their children properly, he argued, they gave up raising children completely or tried to limit the number of children they bore.\footnote{103. Sitzung vom 1. Februar, 1913, p.3454.}

They agreed that there was a profound and pressing need for more reformative measures beyond the punitive laws against contraceptive devices. Social Democrats like Bückner indicated that family limitation would not disappear through the prohibition of contraception and abortion.
or through moral advice\(^{40}\) because the drop in the birth rate was a “natural consequence of the social and economic difficulties which the working class encountered.”\(^{41}\) Another Social Democrat, August Brey, argued that article No. 56 would eventually mean discrimination against the working class because there was no way to prohibit the upper class from acquiring the contraceptive devices. As a solution to this issue, he proposed the introduction of proper housing and tax policies and to enact the labor law protecting motherhood.\(^{42}\) Wilhelm Stolle held the same view; since birth control was closely connected with business fluctuations, the best way to interrupt the fertility decline was to improve the economic condition of the working class by changing economic policy.\(^{43}\)

Although the SPD pointed out the miserable condition of the working class rather than moral decay, they did not proceed to actively pursue a comprehensive social welfare program and put it into practice. It is hardly surprising given the fact that there was no unified position about the fertility decline within the SPD and that key figures like Clara Zetkin viewed low birth rate as a personal issue. The problem was that there existed no channel through which the reality of working class women could pass into the party’s program. Even female socialists were far more concerned with class conflict than with gender issues.

However, it was not so easy to position this “private affair” merely as such in a society in which nationalistic competition became intense, especially in the period preceding WWI. The SPD could make clear in what sense they were different from other conservative parties when the German

\(^{40}\) 103, Sitzung vom 1, Februar, 1913, p.3454.
\(^{41}\) 210, Sitzung vom 10, Februar 1914.
\(^{42}\) 176, Sitzung vom 27, November 1913, pp.6027-8.
\(^{43}\) 178, Sitzung vom 29, November 1913, p.6078.
government endeavored to prohibit contraception by strengthening the penal code. The SPD clearly opposed it. Indeed, SPD was the only political party which was against governmental intervention in the family limitation issue. In response to the governmental approach to punish the sale of contraceptive devices, the SPD organized a mass demonstration on March 3rd, 1914, which was reported in the SPD feminist journal entitled “Gleichheit (The Equality).” During this demonstration, one of the famous agitators from the SPD, Luise Zietz, was reported to have denounced government’s scheme as “the crazy one” and to have insisted that the government’s proposal stemmed from “a lack of conscience and flippancy.” She proclaimed that birth control should belong to “the innermost core” of the people and the police should not dare to inspect the bedroom. The policy against birth control eventually took aim at the working class, Zietz argued, because the upper echelon of civil society could easily evade the ban on contraception. According to Zietz, family limitation was caused by capitalism. Therefore, the low birthrate could be remedied only through social reform, Luise Zietz interpreted the penal code against birth control as “Gebärförgung (compulsion for childbirth).”

Ascribing the decline in birth rate to the spread of contraceptive is like putting the cart before the horse. Dr. Polano who conducted a survey on the birth control in Berlin during the period between 1886 and 1894 was completely right in insisting that it was impossible to prohibit contraception

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44) *Die Gleichheit* vom 15.4.1914, 29.4.1914, pp. 242-4. Her suggestions included extending the labor law to protect mothers and infants, installing facilities for food preparation, establishing day care centers and kindergartens to ease the double burden of household chores and work, reducing daily necessities, improving housing conditions, and endowing citizens with universal suffrage and freedom of association in order to help the workers to actualize their own interest.
within marriage and that the fight against contraception within a marriage was “quixotic.” He properly assumed that the ban on contraceptives increased the rate of venereal disease and the out-of-wedlock birth, and thus argued that the best way to resolve the low birth rate was to decrease the infant mortality and to encourage people to be happy with child-rearing (Polano, 1917: 578). Another doctor, Max Hirsch, indicated that the prohibition of contraceptives resulted in the dramatic increase of abortion.\(^{45}\)

In short, the condition of German working class women was not seriously taken into consideration in the legislative debate. As such, there was no effective mechanism for women to influence the discussions in parliament. In the case of the US, educated middle-class women could influence the policies for working class women and health care, at least at the provincial level. However, the highly developed German bureaucracy effectively blocked any chance that a women’s voluntary initiative could be incorporated into governmental policies. The same could be true of the debate over the declining birth rate. Neither the SPD, nor the conservative parties reached out properly to women’s interests. The voice of women was simply overlooked (Sachße, 1993: 136-58). Adolf Henning, a representative from the Deutschkonservative Partei (German Conservative party), said, “With respect to child rearing and women’s disease, we should invite the opinions of the experienced women who know these problems best.”\(^{46}\) Such attitudes were more often than not the exception rather than the rule in Reichstag debates.

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4. Conclusion

The decision of whether to give birth to and raise offspring was a problem overlaid with multiple motives. As long as the desire of the people to limit family size was central to the fertility decline, the German pronatalists were fighting a losing battle. By outlawing contraceptive devices, they fought the symptoms rather than the disease itself. Dr. Moses said that no matter what Zetkin or Luxemburg might think, birth control was already a reality in the working class.47)

However, contemporary scholars, journalists, and politicians considered the declining birth rate to be a social problem. Furthermore, most politicians agreed that the declining birth rate sprang from the rise of socialism. Although the debate over the declining birth rate was exploited as a means to attack the SPD, the SPD and other conservative parties did not differ much in their opinion. With the exception of some politicians like Bernstein and the medical doctors who were well acquainted with the condition of the working class, the SPD overlooked this issue. Unlike the conservative parties which viewed the fertility decline merely in a negative light, SPD knew the paradox of the fertility decline: the fertility decline meant decrease in the working class population on the one hand. On the other hand, SPD knew quite well the misery caused by the high fertility rate among the working class. Facing this paradox, SPD decided not to deal with this issue, till the German government tried to regulate birth control through penal code on the verge of the World War I. The birth strike was not listed as the main interest of the SPD. Even Clara Zetkin, the leader of

the Social Democratic women’s organization, viewed it as a concern of the individual person which could not be incorporated into the party program. The women’s organization of the SPD put priority on class conflict rather than the issues specific to women. As a result, the debate over the birth rate drop was not led by the women themselves.

The decisive difference between the SPD and other conservative parties was the fact that the SPD was against governmental intervention in family affairs and viewed sexuality and family planning as a responsibility that fell outside the purview of the government. As the government tried to resolve this issue by imposing legal sanctions against birth control, the SPD was the only political party which was against governmental intervention in the choices made regarding a woman’s body.

However, the SPD did not proceed to draft comprehensive social welfare measures in order to wrestle with the fertility decline. Thus, the birth control issue lay at the hands of women. The women who could not find the proper means to practice contraception were driven to abortion. Annually, hundreds of the women were accused of practicing abortion and were consequently imprisoned. In 1913, 1,809 persons were tried and 1,467 convicted. Out of those convicted, 570 were sentenced to between three and twelve months’s imprisonment, 769 to under three month’s imprisonment, but 83 to over one year’s imprisonment, and 45 to penal servitude for an unspecified length.

In summary, German society ran about in confusion and did not know how to properly react to such an unprecedented decline in fertility. Given that the main actors, women, had no way to take part in the debate over this issue, it is not surprising that German politicians fought against the symptom, not against the root of the disease.
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-Abstract-

The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Debate on the Fertility Decline in the German Empire (1870~1918)

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This paper aimed to examine the debate over the fertility decline in the German Empire, focusing on the role of the SPD. During the German Empire, the fertility rate dramatically declined and the growing awareness of a continuous decline in the birth rate prompted a massive debate among politicians, doctors, sociologists, and feminist activists. The fertility decline was negatively evaluated and generated consciousness of crisis. However, it was not the only way to face this new phenomenon. Indeed, the use of birth control among the upper class was interpreted as a part of a modernizing process. As the same phenomenon reached the working class, it suddenly became a social problem and was attributed to the SPD. The debate over the fertility decline in imperial German society ridden with a fierce class conflict was developed into a weapon against the SPD.

Contrary to the assumption of conservative politicians, the SPD had no clear-cut position on this issue. Except for a few politicians like Kautsky and the doctors who came into frequent contact with the workers, the

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“birth strike” was not listed as the main interest of the SPD. Even Clara Zetkin, the leader of the Social Democratic women’s organization viewed it as a concern of the individual person which could not be incorporated in the party program. The women’s organization of the SPD put priority on class conflict rather than issues specific to women. As a result, the debate over the birth rate decline within the SPD was not led by the women themselves.

There could have been various means to stimulate the birth rate. Improvement in the welfare system, such as tax relief for large families, better housing conditions, and substantial maternity protection, could have been feasible solutions to the demographic crisis. However, Germany chose to respond to this crisis by imposing legal sanctions against birth control. In addition to paragraphs 218-220 of the German criminal law enacted in 1872 which prescribed penal servitude for anyone who had an abortion or people who helped to practice it, Paragraph 184.3 of the civil code was enacted in order to outlaw the advertising, display, and publicizing of contraceptives with an ‘indecent’ intention, although selling or manufacturing contraceptives was not forbidden. Such a punitive approach was especially preferred by the government and conservative parties because it was easy to implement and “cheap” in comparison with the comprehensive social welfare program.

What made the SPD different from other conservative parties was the fact that the SPD opposed the government’s attempt to prohibit contraception by means of strengthening a penal code. According to the SPD, it was not only morally unacceptable, but also technically impossible for the government to intervene in family limitation. Moreover, politicians from the SPD criticized that such a punitive policy targeted the working class
because the upper echelon of the society could easily evade the ban on contraceptives.

However, the SPD did not proceed to draft comprehensive social welfare measures in order to fight the fertility decline. The miserable condition of working class women remained as an invisible social phenomenon even within the SPD. The German women who could not find the proper means to practice contraception were driven to have abortions. Annually, hundreds of the women were accused of practicing abortion and imprisoned.

In sum, German society ran about in confusion and did not know how to properly respond to the unprecedented decline in fertility. By defining the fertility decline just as a social disease due to moral decay and influence of socialism, German society lost a chance to rationalize itself. Given that women, the main actors, had no way to take part in the debate over this issue, it is not surprising that German society fought against the symptom of the disease, not against its root.

**Key Word:** Birth Strike, birth control, fertility decline, SPD, social welfare