

From the Other Side of the Tracks

Julius Lester

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It is ironic to find the Pope's recent encyclical on birth control to be in line with the statements of many black militants. The Pope, of course, tries to place his opposition to birth control on moral grounds—that is, he argues that to prevent a life from coming into being is as much an act against moral law as willfully to take a life. Some black militants oppose birth control because they see it as a genocidal weapon against the black community, which, in those instances of forced sterilization of welfare mothers, it is. However, both the Pope and those militants who oppose birth control are giving allegiance in their own ways to an old principle: there is strength in numbers.

Of course, it would be ridiculous to expect that the most prestigious celibate in the world would have any understanding of the fact that to oppose birth control is to affirm woman control. The ideal woman to the Pope is an Ethel Kennedy, who seems to “drop one” every year. The Ethel Kennedys of the world can afford to give birth to ten a year, because they have the money to not raise their own children. Those black militants who stand up and tell women, “Produce black babies!” are telling black women to be slaves. If one could have 11 children and the Kennedy fortune, then by all means produce black babies. To have 11 children and a welfare check is almost akin to suicide, no matter how much black militants may want to romanticize the black mother. Undeniably, black mothers have done a fantastic job under incredible circumstances, but because black mothers have made a good showing of a bad thing, that doesn't mean it's desirable. Most often it is black males and women without children who are opposed to birth control. Neither group has much of a right to an opinion on the subject.

If blacks within the movement are seriously concerned about revolution, then they should be urging women to postpone having children, because women need to be free for the fullest participation in the struggle. It is no accident that in every revolutionary society, one of the first jobs is the setting up of birth control clinics. Their aim is not to stop the birth of children for time immemorial. They recognize the very simple fact that most women want to have children. Their aim is merely to help a husband and wife plan when their children should come into the world. When would it be best for the parents and the society?

Most revolutionary countries go even farther, and urge not only the postponing of families, but ask the youth to defer marriage until they reach their late '20s or early '30s. In Vietnam today, there is a movement called “The Three Don'ts,” which are: “If you meet a boy (girl), don't fall in love, If you fall in love, don't get engaged. If you get engaged, don't get married.” If you are involved in a revolution, then the first necessity is to defer many of your personal desires. The first priority is the revolution.

Those black militants who oppose voluntary birth control are, in actuality, helping the enemy. As long as black women are confined to raising the family, the revolution will be without their necessary abilities. As long as they urge women to have children, they are confining women to be enslaved to their bodies, from which, with birth control pills, they can now be so easily liberated.

The whole concept of birth control, as it is presented in this country, is a negative one, and perhaps it is this which many militants react against when they say, “Whitey is trying to tell you that you can't have black babies.” It is not so much a matter of “controlling birth” as it is protecting the physical, mental and spiritual health of women.

To have a child is more than a physical act—much more. In actuality, giving birth to a child is a small part of the job and only the beginning. If one is a revolutionary, then he is concerned, above all, with the success of that revolution and all those involved. As long as we think that men are the only ones involved in revolution, we're bound to lose. As long as we insist on chaining women to their physiological beings, we lose.

The black woman may feel proud that the black man wants her to bear his children. She should feel proud, but if the black man sees birth control as a threat to his masculinity, then he should understand that no one wants to deny him his right to have a family. He is only being asked to give his woman the same opportunity to be a total revolutionary as he has been given by virtue of the fact that he is a man.

There is power in numbers, but that power is greatly diminished if a lot of those numbers have to sit at home and change diapers instead of being on the front lines, where most of them would rather be.

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