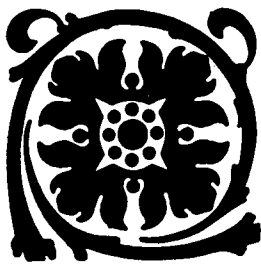


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# Ad Feminam



*Atlantis* sometimes receives statements of a more personal nature than the usual scholarly article. Recognizing that the "personal is political" and can service as *prima materia* for further research and study, AD FEMINAM is published on an occasional basis. We hope that such a section will stimulate debate and discussion and we invite responses from our readers.

# The Nourrice in Paris, Past and Present

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The word *nourrice* or child's nurse as used today in France refers to a woman who takes care of small children for pay in her own home. My first experiences with Paris *nourrices* were not auspicious. In 1979 I was in France for a sabbatical leave with my husband and our eight-month old son. Finding someone to take care of the child involved a long search, starting at the local *mairie* (17<sup>e</sup> *arrondissement*). The social worker explained all the necessary regulations and rate of pay (45 francs a day, plus 10 francs for the child's midday meal, plus insurance, plus paid vacation, etc.) and explained that it would probably be difficult to find someone to take a child half time. She warned me about the dangers of hiring a *nourrice clandestine*, who had not complied with all the official regulations and might not provide good care.

Indeed she was right about the difficulties. None of the women whose names she had given me was willing to take a child part time, unless I would pay the full-time rate. Finally one agreed to a slight reduction in the rate, but she would not grant my request to stay with the child for a short period during his first few days of adjustment. It was all or nothing—he stayed or he did not. There was to be no nonsense about separation anxiety.

For several weeks the search went on, making other work all but impossible. We

tracked down the someone who knew someone who . . . . Finally I was given the name of Mme A., who operated a *crèche à domicile* and might have a space. The woman in question had as many children as she was allowed to take but at my urgent request, she agreed to take one more on a part-time basis. My problems seemed to be at an end until a few days later when we realized that she simply put the child in a small playpen and left him there for the entire four-hour period. Being unused to such confinement, he howled, except for his one-hour nap. Mme A. did not hide the fact that he was in the playpen all the time. What else would one do with a baby? If you put him on the floor he would crawl all over the place; and besides, floors are not clean. (Her floor was in fact spotless.) Anyway, what was the problem? He would learn to walk just as soon that way.

Mme A. was not an indifferent or negligent person. On the contrary, she was very concerned about the baby's physical health, and worried about the way we dressed him so lightly to go outdoors. Like all other French people that we met, she was shocked at our practice of giving him cold milk straight from the refrigerator (when weaning started he would not wait for the bottle to be warmed), and of laying him on the floor to change his diapers.

After just over a week we took him away from her place because he cried as soon as we approached her door. By that time we had spoken to one *nourrice clandestine* who seemed to have no notion of safety; her idea of a baby bed, for example, was two armchairs pushed together. And we found another—this one very good—from a notice in a nearby supermarket. This woman, Mme B., had one child in school and one at home, and had never taken care of someone else's child before. In the morning she worked as a bookkeeper, leaving her small son with another *nourrice clandestine*. She accepted our child half time at half price, 23 francs a day without the added benefits (being already covered by insurance, etc. at her regular work). No doubt this just covered her own child care expenses. She treated our son as a member of her family, took him to the park with her own son and took great pride in his accomplishments. When he learned to walk she was almost as pleased as we were. He was happy with her, and for our part, we were convinced that we had found the best *nourrice* in Paris.

According to the *Annuaire Statistique de la France 1977*, the proportion of women in France employed outside the home increased slightly from 38.6% in 1968 to 40.8% in 1975.<sup>1</sup> The proportion is higher in cities than in rural areas, and particularly high in Paris. Child care is handled by working mothers in one of several ways. A child who has reached the age of three can go to an *école maternelle*. A large number of French children are in such schools and the system seems to be a good one. The *école maternelle* movement, like the kindergarten movement in other countries, had among its aims the encouragement of socializing, discovery of the world and creative activity. It is considered a valuable experience for children and, although not obligatory, many parents send their children to school from the age of three even when the mother

does not work outside the home. Some arrangement may have to be made if her working hours are long, but in general, the system is satisfactory.

For mothers of younger children child care arrangements are more complex. First, children can be cared for by a relative, often the grandmother. This is more common in smaller places, where parents and grandparents live close enough together to make it possible. In cities, particularly Paris, many young people have moved in from the country or from smaller towns without their parents, and must find another means of providing child care.

Secondly, a *nourrice* can be employed to care for children in her own home. As the social worker told me, it is illegal in France to care for other people's children for pay without being registered, or *agrée*. This is done through the *mairie*: the prospective *nourrice* must pass a health examination and an investigation of her character, and must agree to periodic inspection in her home. No special training is necessary. There is a limit (usually three) to the number of children, including her own, that she may keep.<sup>2</sup> The employer must pay for insurance and two weeks a year of vacation. There are regulations about the cases in which the employer does and does not pay when the child does not go to the *nourrice's* house in case of illness, holidays, etc.

In addition to the *nourrices agréées*, there are also non-registered *nourrices clandestines*. The reasons for not going through official channels are various, and may include a general dislike of bureaucracy, a desire to avoid paying taxes or a reluctance to be classified as a professional *nourrice*, especially if, like Mme B., they do not intend to perform the job for very long. In some cases, the women might not provide ac-

ceptable care or surroundings for children. Whereas a certain standard of care is supposed to be provided by the *agrées*, that given by the *clandestines* can vary from excellent to very bad. More on this later.

It is of course possible to have someone come in to care for the child or children, or to hire a *jeune fille au pair*. But this is expensive. An *au pair* for example, must have her own room—not an easy condition to fulfill in a city where rents are high and many parents do not themselves have a room separate from the child's room. These solutions are thus for a small number of families only.

In some cases, *nourrices* are organized into *crèches familiales*. They still work at home, but there is a back-up organization of administrative and advisory personnel to help them. This is a relatively new system, approved by some but criticized by others who say it is just a way of avoiding the setting up of more appropriate *crèches*.

Finally, there are the *crèches collectives*, with their own premises and with trained personnel. The *crèches* were originally formed to care for the children of working mothers during their hours of work. Much care was taken to provide clean surroundings in the *crèches* and to protect the children from the spread of disease. The influence of this beginning is still felt. It has been suggested that the concern for cleanliness sometimes overshadows other considerations, and causes the *crèches* to be run in a rather rigid way.<sup>3</sup> In recent years some of them have been experimenting with a more flexible approach.

The greatest problem with the *crèches* is that there are not enough of them. They generally have long waiting lists, and some of them, understandably enough, give preference to those children most in need of stable care. According

to the *Annuaire statistique de la France 1977*, there were 883 *crèches collectives* with a total of 42,080 places, and 284 *crèches familiales* with 19,496 places. A great advantage of the *crèches* from the parents' point of view is that they are subsidized by the state and are therefore cheaper than the hiring of a *nourrice*.

The *Annuaire statistique de la santé et de l'action sociale 1977* gives the following round figures for the care of children under three whose mothers work:

Hors contrôle (unknown)	200,000
Crèche collective	40,000
Crèche familiale	20,000
Gardienne agréée ( <i>nourrice agréée</i> )	380,000
Garde maternelle	240,000
Total	800,000

By far the largest group, amounting to almost half the total, are cared for by *nourrices agréées* and, presumably, many of the unknown group are under the care of *nourrices clandestines*.

The quality of care during the mother's absence is extremely important because of the long hours of work. Many businesses and offices open early in the morning and do not close until seven or even eight in the evening. Although some people live near their work, many do not. An hour's travel time each way is not unusual in Paris. The long lunch hour is good for those who work near their homes, but the others cannot return home for a family meal. In many families, parents and children

see each other only early in the morning and just long enough in the evening for dinner and bedtime. As for fathers, most of them are away at work so much of the time that according to Laurence Pernoud, author of the popular child care manual *J'élève mon enfant*, children do not realize for the first year of life that they have two parents.

One might think then that parents would be extremely selective about the person to whom they confide the care of their children. In some cases, unfortunately, they do not have much choice, since there is always a shortage of *nourrices* in Paris. Some parents, unable to find one near them, must send their children some distance away and see them only on weekends.<sup>4</sup> They are happy if they can find one close by, but may not have the luxury of making a selection.

Some *nourrices* are professionals who through years of experience have established their ways of doing things and have no intention of changing just to accommodate inexperienced parents. As Mme A. told me several times, "Je connais les enfants, c'est ma profession." (I know children, that's my profession.)

The difficulties of making satisfactory child care arrangements led two women of my acquaintance to give up good jobs, one as a chartered accountant and one as the office manager of a large company. Both of them had had their children kept by the same woman, a *nourrice agréée*, and found as I did that the children simply stayed in their beds all day. Finally the children gave the distress signal by crying as they approached the door. Being unable to find someone more satisfactory, the mothers gave up their work. They were fortunate in being able to do so; for many families, the woman's salary is an economic necessity.

Two questions arise from the preceding discussion. First, why has the government of France accepted a responsibility for the regulation of child care and the provision of some facilities, whereas the government of Canada (and that of the United States) has not? Secondly, why, despite the commendable efforts and intentions of the government, do things not always work out so well in practice? In order to answer these questions, we must look at the historical origins of the present system.

Until the general availability of safe, pure animal milk about the beginning of the twentieth century and the development of formulas (in French, "lait maternisé") that resemble human milk in composition, the word *nourrice* meant a wetnurse. The practice of having babies fed by a woman other than the mother is ancient; it was sometimes found among the aristocracy in Greece and Rome. But for most of history, it was confined to a small number of people, and the nurse usually became part of the household of the child's family.<sup>5</sup>

Wetnursing in Europe reached its height in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was especially widespread in France. At this time the child was sent away from the parents' home to live with the nurse and her family. An overwhelming proportion of children in the cities were involved. Maxime de Sarthe-Lenoir, Lieutenant Général de Police de Paris, in his *Détail de quelques établissemens de la Ville de Paris* (1780), estimates at twenty or twenty-one thousand the number of children born each year in Paris. Of these, he says, a thirtieth at most are fed their mothers' milk. A similar number are fed in the family home by hired nurses. Two or three thousand, belonging to the wealthy classes, are scattered about in the *faubourgs* and the surrounding areas, with nurses found by the parents and paid higher wages

because of their proximity. The less rich and therefore more numerous classes, being forced to hire nurses farther away and therefore more difficult to find, have had to use the services of intermediaries. Because of the abuses caused by this, the city of Paris established Bureaux des Recommanderesses to serve the function of intermediary. There were also a great number of children abandoned by their parents and taken to the Hôpital des Enfants-Trouvés.<sup>6</sup>

It was thus customary in all social classes to send children out to nurse. As Sarthe-Lenoir indicates, there were three levels of arrangements, depending on the position of the parents. Rich people found their own nurses by personal contacts. They preferred those who lived near Paris, particularly to the south of the city, a relatively prosperous area that was considered healthy. Parents usually chose the nurse in advance, and since they could visit their children, they had some idea of their health and progress and of the care that they received.

At a middle level were the great number of people who went through the Bureau des Recommanderesses.<sup>7</sup> The profession of Recommanderesse or intermediary goes back to the sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century there were two women in this office, and in 1715 the number was increased to four, under the authority of the Lieutenant Général de Police. In 1769 the four bureaux were consolidated into one under the title of Bureau des Nourrices, which was finally abolished in 1876. In the eighteenth century the bureau (i.e., all four parts together) placed about 8,000 to 10,000 children annually, approximately half the children born in the city. The occupations of the parents show them to be of quite modest condition; they include not only merchants and *maîtres artisans* but also *compagnons artisans* and servants.

Parents generally came to the bureau after the birth of the child to find a nurse who had come in from the country seeking to be hired. They chose one on the basis of appearance, making sure that she did have milk. They could have her undergo a medical examination at their expense. Each nurse was required to have a certificate of good morals from her *curé*. However, the parents had no opportunity to see where the nurse lived, and thus under what conditions their child would be living for the next several years; nor did they know much about her character or that of her husband and family, except that it was not bad enough to attract the notice of the *curé*.

Because of the distances involved and the modest circumstances of the families, parents usually did not see their children for the entire period. Their only contact was through *meneurs* who worked for the Bureau des Recommanderesses. These agents traveled about the countryside, recruited nurses, brought them back home with the babies (or simply took the babies to them in the country in some cases), collected the monthly wages from the parents and delivered them to the nurses, took clothing and other supplies sent by the parents, and brought back reports about the children. At the end of a year or two or sometimes three, if the child had survived, the *meneur* brought it back to the parents. The mortality rate was quite high; a third to a half the children died at nurse.<sup>8</sup> When the child was returned, the parents of course were complete strangers, and the child in most cases never again saw the woman who had been its mother for the first few years of life.

At the third and lowest level were the children abandoned by their parents. These children, often but not always illegitimate, were taken to the Hôpital des Enfants-Trouvés, an establishment founded in 1670.

Not all the children at the Hôpital came from Paris. Figures of six to seven thousand, equal to about a third of all births in Paris, are given for some years in the eighteenth century, but they include babies born in the country and brought in by carriers to the city.<sup>9</sup> These children were then sent back out to nurse, if they managed to survive the first trip.

Because the Hôpital paid less than the parents who placed their children through the Bureau des Recommanderesses, there was a chronic shortage of nurses. Those children who were sent out to nurse immediately had a much better chance of survival than those who had to wait, for at the Salle des Pouparts of the Hôpital there were 15 nurses at the most for an average of 100 children to feed. Not surprisingly, the mortality rates for these children ranged from 66 to 90 per cent.<sup>10</sup> The children for whom nurses were found were more fortunate, though they too had to make long journeys under difficult conditions. It became the rule to keep children from the Hôpital with the nurse for five years, although of course they were not breastfed for so long. (The age of weaning varied in the eighteenth century. Moralists often recommend two or three years, but one year is frequently mentioned by writers of the time, and in some cases it was less.)

The women who hired themselves out as wetnurses, or *nourrices mercenaires*, whether for the parents or through the Hôpital, were generally quite poor. Except for women who had lost their babies, it meant weaning their own children early, thus exposing them to greater risks of dying. Sometimes the nurse shared her milk between the two babies, or farmed her own out to another woman at a lower price. The mortality rate for nurses' children was also quite high.

Women living in such poverty suffered from poor nutrition and poor sanitation. They usually had older children to care for, and did housework as well as work in the fields. Despite the frequently expressed belief that the country was better for children than the city because of the purer air, it is doubtful that the children sent out to nurse got much benefit from this healthy way of life. Despite all the disadvantages of the city, their chances of surviving, as summarized by A. Chamoux, were better if they were nursed by their mothers. For example, in Lyon, 486 indigent mothers were paid 9 francs a month by the "Société pour encourager les mères peu fortunées" to nurse their children for a year. The mortality rate was 16%, while about two thirds of the children sent out to nurse died. In Paris, two different sets of figures give the mortality rate of children nursed by their mothers as one in four and one in 5-3/4, or 18%. This compares with a rate of up to 50% for children at nurse.<sup>11</sup>

In the course of the eighteenth century, opinion turned against sending children out to nurse. Some doctors and writers had opposed the practice all along and the movement gained force. It reached the general reading public through Rousseau's *Emile* (1762). Subsequent writers mention the influence of this book in encouraging maternal breastfeeding. Nature was called on by most writers to reinforce the appeal, along with either religion or patriotism (*civisme*, the republican spirit, etc.), depending on the date and the political situation at the time. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the cause was won, at least as far as written works were concerned.<sup>12</sup>

But in the nineteenth century the numbers of hired nurses increased. Why this contradiction? To answer the question one must consider the different social classes involved.

The reaction against wetnursing and in favour of maternal feeding reached mainly the upper classes, including aristocracy and wealthy bourgeoisie. Among the less wealthy groups the employment of women outside the home was increasing, and more people were moving into the cities. This created a larger clientele for wetnurses. Although the nurses were supposed to be supervised to make sure that the children received good care, supervision was inadequate. In the 1860s there was a crisis in the wetnursing business and much public concern about the high mortality rate. New laws were passed to regulate the practice of commercial nursing. But the real change came about only around the turn of the century, when animal milk in sterilized, dried, or condensed form became generally available.<sup>13</sup>

The *nourrice* as wetnurse has practically disappeared today. The term now applies to what used to be called a *nourrice sèche*, or dry nurse, and is officially referred to as an *aide maternelle* in an effort to change the old image. Since the *nourrice* does not have to breastfeed the children in her charge, many more women can do the job, and they can do it longer; the natural limits have been extended. For this reason, most people working in Paris can find someone in the city, even if not always close to their home. Cases where parents send their children out of the city do still exist, however. Most parents see their children every day, or at least on weekends. They can thus keep check on the child's development, even if they do not know exactly what happens all day. If the child is well and happy, the parents are reassured; if not, and if things get too bad, they can try to make other arrangements.

The physical care of small children is of course much more satisfactory now than in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and infant mortality has dropped drastically. This is partly because of the availability of a good sup-

ply of cow's milk from the beginning or after weaning (three months is now considered to be a "complete" breastfeeding, according to many sources today).<sup>14</sup> Other reasons are the much improved hygienic conditions almost everywhere, and the various measures on the part of the government, such as prenatal care, paid maternity leave, etc.

Some answers to our two questions should be a little clearer by now. The government of France has long accepted a responsibility for child care because in the past, child care meant wetnursing, a very widespread phenomenon. The difference between good and bad wetnursing was often the difference between life and death. Regulations were adopted and inspections were carried out (though rarely, in practice) to provide some protection for the children. In Canada the practice of sending children out to nurse was not adopted in the same way. By the time this country became urbanized, better supplies of cow's milk were available, and the situation never became so dramatic as it was in French cities. Another reason for present government action in France is a concern about the low birth rate. In recent years there has been an attempt to encourage people to have children—not the large families of past centuries, but two or three children rather than the one or none chosen by many couples.<sup>15</sup>

As we have seen, the position of *nourrice* is not a very prestigious job category. It is historically associated with poor people, who sometimes had to sacrifice the welfare of their own small children for the sake of earning money. This image has not entirely disappeared, despite efforts by the government. In North America, a mother staying home with a small child might consider also caring for another, both for the money and to provide company for her own child. This could well be seen as an advantage for her child. Such an



arrangement is much less common in France; our *nourrice*, Mme B., was an exception. Not being *agrée*, she was in violation of the law. But she was excellent, whereas the legally registered *nourrices* are not necessarily always good.

The day-to-day experience of bringing up children is made up of many things, influenced by many factors. These factors include living conditions and hours of work, one's own attitudes and those of other people, and public policies. Much needs to be done in Canada on an institutional level. On the whole, however, it is my impression that conditions for working mothers in Canada are better than in France—certainly better than in Paris. Some of the reasons are simply material: more space, better washing facilities, for example. Some are a matter of attitudes: greater tolerance for childish behaviour. Others, such as the *nourrice* situation, are less easy to understand at first but can be seen to be the result of historical developments and a continuation of practices, attitudes and public policies of the past.

## NOTES

1. The *Year Book of Labour Statistics* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1977) gives the following figures on labour force participation for people of all ages.

Country	Women	Men	Total
France	29.3%	55.6%	42.2%
Canada	27.5%	56.2%	41.8%
United States	32.7%	56.3%	44.2%

2. Mme A.'s *crèche à domicile* simply meant that she was allowed to keep more than three small children. She had had special training and had worked when younger in the regular system of *crèches*.
3. See Hélène Larrive, *Les Crèches: des enfants à la consigne?* (Paris: Seuil, 1978).
4. A colleague of mine moved to Paris from Hungary in 1956. Having to work to support herself and her three-year-old daughter, and not being able to find someone in Paris to care for the child, she was forced to place her in the suburbs. The *nourrice* accepted only on condition that the mother would not visit for the first month; visits by the parents made it hard for the child to adjust, she said. When the mother was finally allowed to visit, the child, feeling abandoned, refused to have anything to do with her, and

could no longer speak Hungarian.

5. Writers who have discussed historical aspects of child care and wetnursing include the following: George Friederic Still, *The History of Paediatrics*, London, H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1931. Reprinted in 1965; Ian G. Wickes, "A History of Infant Feeding," *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 28 (1953), pp. 151-158, 232-240, 343-340, 416-421, and 493-501; Roger Mercier, *L'Enfant dans la société du XVIIIe siècle (avant l'Emile)*, Thèse complémentaire ès Lettres de l'Université de Paris, 1961; Philippe Ariès, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*, Paris, Seuil, 1973; Lloyd de Mause, ed., *The History of Childhood*, Paris: Souvenir Press Ltd., 1974; George D. Sussman, "The Wet-Nursing Business in Nineteenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies* 9 (1975-76), pp. 304-328; Dominique Risler, *Nourrices et Meneurs de Paris au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, Hachette, Bibliothèque Nationale, 1976; Marie-France Morel, "Théories et pratiques de l'allaitement en France au XVIIIe siècle," *Annales de Démographie Historique* 1977, pp. 393-426.
- In addition, the entire 1973 issue of the *Annales de Démographie Historique* is devoted to children in history, especially in France. For ancient history, see "La Conscience médicale antique et la vie des enfants" by R. Etienne, pp. 15-46. For later periods the articles and the documents gathered by Antoinette Chamoux are particularly valuable.
6. The situation in Lyon as described in Prost le Royer Lieutenant-Général de Police, in his *Mémoire sur la conservation des enfans* (1778), was even worse. In this industrial city, the second largest in France, where many women worked in factories, the number of children nursed by their mothers was negligible. There was no official bureau, and the hiring of nurses took place under dreadful conditions. The result was a high death rate even by eighteenth-century standards, and a great number of unhealthy and maimed children returned to the parents at the end of their time at nurse.
7. This organization has been studied by Mercier and Risler (op. cit.).
8. For example, in 1770 there were in round numbers 23,000 children at nurse through the Bureau des Recommanderesses, 7,500 returned to their parents, and 3,000 dead; for 1773, 21,000 at nurse, 5,600 returned, 3,000 dead; for 1776, 22,000 at nurse, 6,600 returned, 2,700 dead. (A. Chamoux, "Mise en nourrice et mortalité des enfants légitimes," *Annales de Démographie Historique* 1973, p. 419). On p. 422, Chamoux quotes an eighteenth-century writer as saying that more than half the children at nurse died in the first year (de Parcieux, *Essais sur les probabilités de la vie humaine*, Paris, 1746). This is a higher proportion than that given just above, where about half as many died as were sent home, thus making about a third of the total.
9. Some sample figures, in round numbers: for 1773, 4,200 children from Paris (including the suburbs), 1,800 from the provinces, total 6,000. For 1777, 4,600 from Paris, 2,100 from the provinces, total 6,700. (A. Chamoux, "L'Enfance abandonnée à Reims à la fin du XVIIIe siècle," *Annales de Démographie Historique* 1973, p. 265).

10. These figures are given by Risler (see Note 5).
11. "Mise en nourrice," p. 421-422.
12. It is sometimes maintained (see especially Morel, Note 6) that medical opinion had been in favour of maternal breastfeeding all along. In fact almost all doctors writing childcare manuals in French, starting with Simon de Vallambert in 1565 and continuing through the eighteenth century, did state that the mother's milk was best for the child. But many of the writers proceeded to hedge this in with restrictions, and to make breastfeeding appear complicated and difficult, as well as dangerous to the health of mother and child and ruinous to the mother's beauty. Any young mother-to-be who read the books must have been discouraged. (The idea is still common in some circles in France that breastfeeding is difficult and likely to ruin the mother's figure). During the course of the eighteenth century there was a reaction against all these complications, and most books written later in the century do say that the matter is much simpler than is generally believed.  
The advice given in eighteenth-century childcare manuals will be discussed in a forthcoming article by this author.
13. See Sussman (Note 5).
14. According to M.W. Beaver, a good supply of animal milk is probably the chief cause of the drop in infant mortality rates in England and Wales, and the same would apply to France. Since children were weaned fairly early and were not given milk after weaning, they suffered from malnutrition and were susceptible to intestinal infections. Once animal milk was available, the milk-drinking time was extended. "Population, Infant Mortality and Milk," *Population Studies* XXVII (1973), pp. 243-254).
15. The birth rate in France has fallen below that necessary to maintain the population at its present level, and any growth must be provided by immigration. The rate is especially low in Paris, where families of one or two children are the norm and many couples remain childless. The government is concerned about this fact for political reasons; a "great" France must have a large and growing population. The positive side of the low birth rate is that those children who are born are for the most part wanted by their parents, which was not always the case in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To some extent a low birth rate and a low infant mortality rate go together.