

The year having kids became a frivolous luxury ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There have been many prominent pregnancy and child care-related issues in 2014, from the UPS pregnancy discrimination case that was recently argued in front of the Supreme Court to the publicity around the scheduling software that makes child care arrangements impossible for working-class parents. In reading and writing about these issues, I've noticed a depressing sentiment: Having children is now often framed as a frivolous lifestyle choice, as if it's a decision that's no different from moving to San Francisco or buying a motorcycle. If you choose to buy that Harley or have that baby, it's on you, lady.

When I've written about middle- and upper-middle-class parents wanting benefits like paid parental leave, this is the typical sort of comment people make: "I see no reason to subsidize women's fantasies of 'having it all.'" As if raising children is just about pinning another badge to a Girl Scout sash. When I write about working-class parents just trying to make ends meet and find safe child care for their offspring, the comments are even crueler: "If you can't afford a dog, don't get a dog. If you can't afford a kid, don't get a kid."

Though these sorts of reactions aren't brand new, I've been seeing more of them. So I decided to ask June Carbone and Naomi Cahn, both law professors and the co-authors of *Marriage Markets: How Inequality is Remaking the American Family* and *Red Families v. Blue Families: Legal Polarization and the Creation of Culture*, about where the framing of children as a lifestyle choice comes from, and whether my suspicion that there's an uptick in people treating child-bearing as this kind of consumer choice is true.

There are two slightly different things going on. For wealthier parents, the turn against child-rearing happened in the late '90s and early aughts, when childless white-collar workers started grouching about the benefits that workers with children received, from tax breaks to more flexible work hours. This coincided with a critical mass of mothers in the workforce. Cahn, a professor at George Washington University, points to the 2000 publication of Elinor Burkett's *The Baby Boon: How Family-Friendly America Cheats the Childless*, as an expression of the growing resentment of parents.

Carbone, a professor at the University of Minnesota, has found in her research and reporting that, since the 2008 recession, the kids-as-your-choice-not-my-problem sentiment has been applied to poorer people. "People weren't saying this as much in 2004," Carbone says.

So what's going on? When Carbone and Cahn wrote their 2010 book, *Red Families v. Blue Families*, they described the blue state model of parenting as the kind where people defer child rearing until "both partners reach maturity and financial independence." Red families have a different model—they promote abstinence until marriage and are pro-life, and so people get married younger, and there are higher rates of teen pregnancy among red families. There used to be sympathy for young parents who were struggling to get by in the "red" model.

Blue families have long preached and practiced "responsible parenting," which is that you shouldn't have children you can't afford. But the shift is that red families are now also on the "responsible parenting" bandwagon.

As Carbone eloquently puts it:

What I see in almost all walks of life is a sense of pessimism about the country. The pie is contracting. People work much harder to stay where they are, the ability to guarantee the same life for your children is declining, and people feel they can't afford to be as generous about anything. You have to be warier of new people, resentful of people around you, you can't expand the benefits available to others without hurting your own chances and those of your children.

The problem here is that wages have stagnated, and Millennials—the people who are starting to have kids now—are having trouble finding jobs that enable them to support themselves, much less families, despite being the most educated generation ever. Unfortunately, instead of blaming a political and corporate system that is making life impossible for everyone, people are blaming parents for the perceived "benefits" they are getting, like unpaid parental leave and child care tax breaks.

Though in some ways, having children is a "choice," to compare it to the purchase of an appliance is appalling. It's a pretty typical part of the human experience. It's not something that should be restricted to people who already won the birth lottery by being born middle class.

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