

That only the elite should have children is a worrying argument

To the Editor: I recently came across the article 'Human reproduction: Right, duty or privilege? South African perspective' by Malcolm de Roubaix in your journal.^[1] It gave an insightful historical overview of the legal framing of reproductive rights in South Africa (SA). Despite the merits of some of its descriptive components, I note with concern the implications of the argument that it presents us with and the assumptions it holds in making its ethical case. The argument itself is at least as old as Plato's Republic in the Western canon, and concerns itself with the important issue of the ethics of procreation.^[2] The more specific question that de Roubaix deals with is: when is it responsible (or not responsible) to procreate and have a child in SA?

Let me begin by expressing my general sympathy with the claim made by the author that 'we should consider the probable quality of life of the child we intend to produce'^[1] in a manner that brings these considerations to bear on our decisions about whether to procreate. This is a kind of personal accountability about reproductive choices that we should encourage. Prospective parents should consider such factors as their sociopsychological situation, their ability to make provisions for their children, the appropriateness of the available support systems that they would have for the child, and so on, with the myriad of other considerations relevant to the well-being of the child and the community they would be joining. De Roubaix's article, though, focuses on the financial or material means of parents as a criterion upon which to decide fitness to procreate. His case is summed up in this paragraph in which he says:

'We should consider the probable quality of life of the child we intend to produce, and evaluate our personal social and economic environment before contemplating pregnancy: is it conducive to rearing a child in a manner commensurate with section 28 of the Bill of Rights? If not, we are not responsible parents, and should reconsider. This does not imply anti-natalism or ultimate elitism – that only the rich should procreate (ironically, they tend to limit their reproduction) – or that affluence is essential for a fulfilling and happy childhood. However, I do argue that families should be limited to the extent that parents can care for their child/children and provide him/her/them with the best possible future. Radical social engineering as practised in China and India are incompatible with contemporary notions of democracy and human rights. The state nevertheless has a responsibility: to intervene by designing and initiating programmes to promote responsible parenthood within social development – something apparently totally absent in our current planning.'^[1]

The argument resolves in saying that poor people should not have children, but that we should not mandate them not to. It is suggested that we should create programmes to steer poor people away from child-rearing. In essence, de Roubaix is arguing that when the poor have children despite their social station, they are performing a morally blameworthy act that should be characterised as not being responsible.

Although de Roubaix would like to avoid the implication his argument is making that only the rich should procreate, and other forms of

elitism, his argument does imply an elitism about procreation. He does not provide us with any reasons to believe his view avoids this implication, especially when we consider that most individuals in SA cannot provide a life for a child commensurate with section 28 of the Bill of Rights in the SA Constitution. This stipulation in the Constitution is aspirational, as is much of the content of the Constitution.

Among other stipulations of section 28, it says that every child has the right 'to basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care services and social services'.^[3] Although SA consistently secures food sufficiency well beyond what is needed to provide for everyone in the country, child malnutrition is rampant, with stunting recently reported to be at levels of about 25%^[4] – 'a reflection of widespread multidimensional poverty and [...] an indictment of the failure of economic and social policies over many decades', despite national interventions attempting to alleviate the issue.^[4] The provision of these and other Constitutionally protected socioeconomic rights remain unattained aspirations that rather stand as unresolved problems for children and a large proportion of the SA population, and particularly among Black people.^[5] These are part of a myriad of systemic problems children face in SA, especially when they are born into poverty.^[6] Many of these issues are structural failures, not the personal failures of parents to do right by their children.

The implication of de Roubaix's argument is that bringing children into the world to face such challenges is not responsible on the part of parents. More specifically, the claim he makes is that parents who cannot provide a life for children commensurate with section 28 of the Bill of Rights are not responsible. If we were to accept this argument, we would have to say, according to de Roubaix's standards, that a large proportion of parents in SA are not responsible, given their inability to provide a life for their children commensurate with section 28 of the Bill of Rights. This is despite the fact that many of the reasons for which parents are not able to provide such a life for children are a direct consequence of a history of structural failures that parents are not themselves necessarily responsible for. The ability of parents to provide their children with adequate healthcare or an education, for instance, is undermined by government failure to provide what our taxes already provide funding for. A parent reliant on public services that are not provided at the level at which they are funded is not the irresponsible party in this scenario. This argument can be extended to problematise the assumption that the poor are automatically the irresponsible party when children's needs cannot be met by parents. Parents may not be morally blameworthy in the sense of not being responsible when procreating while poor, especially when we consider how it is that the majority of South Africans came to be poor (e.g. by the design of apartheid and colonialism), and why it is that they remain poor (e.g. the developmental failures of the present government) without reasonable social supports or accommodations for them and their children.

My point in raising these worries with regard to de Roubaix's argument is to show the impoverishment of an ethics of reproduction

that is reliant on a person's socioeconomic station but that ignores how people have come to be in their particular socioeconomic position. Counter to the elitist argument de Roubaix mounts, I would argue that it is wrong to automatically characterise poor parents as not being responsible because they cannot provide a standard of life commensurate with section 28 of the Bill of Rights, especially when how they have come to be unable to provide such a life is as a result of oppression and subsequent government ineptitude and failure. Taken in context, the bulk of moral blame may lie at the feet of other social actors, despite the role that an individual's personal agency in respect to procreation will play in the development of their personal socioeconomic condition.

The problem with de Roubaix's account is that it focuses on a moralisation of reproductive choices, rather than couching these choices in the socioeconomic and political context in which these choices are made. When looked at solely at the level of individual choice, the argument that 'families should be limited to the extent that parents can care for their child/children and provide him/her/them with the best possible future'^[1] and the argument that parents who cannot care for their children in this way, may seem compelling. But when other contextual factors are included in our deliberation about the ethics of procreation, we find that it may not be the case that parents have acted irresponsibly in bringing life into the world that they are not necessarily equipped to provide with the requisite care. De Roubaix's argument leaves only the elite as parties that could be considered responsible in having children. Such an argument, where only the elite should have children, is worryingly problematic, and is an argument I hope that de Roubaix will reconsider.

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De Roubaix responds:

Cherry-picking, selective reading and the creation of straw arguments?

I thank Mr Msimang for his comments^[1] on my article^[2] and the editor for inviting my response. I urge readers to read both article and comments and be the adjudicators; the article has already had 1 430 full text views. I limit my response to a few poignant points.

Firstly, we apparently agree that 'we should consider the probable quality of life of the child we intend to produce and evaluate our personal social and economic environment before contemplating pregnancy' (my words), 'in a manner that brings these considerations to bear on our decisions about whether to procreate' (Msimang's words, paraphrasing mine). He talks of 'a kind of personal accountability about reproductive choices that we should encourage'. Prospective parents should consider such factors as 'their sociopsychological situation, their ability to make provisions for their children, the appropriateness of the available support systems that they would have for the child, and so on, with the myriad of other considerations relevant to the well-being of the child and the community (s)he would be joining'. I consequently deduce that we actually agree on the principle of responsible parenthood. Yet Msimang is not prepared to follow his own argument to its obvious logical conclusion – that not following these dictums amounts to some form of irresponsibility. He seems to absolve the poor from such responsibility. Msimang's argument, if I understood it, is that it is irresponsible to even talk about responsible parenthood if a multitude of factors – economic, social, historical – limit the ability for responsible parenthood. These factors stack up in the lives of the poor. Let's take the counter-argument for a moment: what would be the consequences should we not expect of agents to be personally responsible for their actions because they are poor? Does it imply that being poor equates to not having agency? It goes without saying that there may be levels of taking responsibility, which in itself can depend on a myriad of other circumstances. And there is a grade difference between irresponsibility (not being accountable, avoiding duty) and culpability (guilt). Both Msimang and I have focused on poverty because it is so devastatingly prevalent in this country. Poverty and large families go hand in hand, and my argument is that one sure route to socioeconomic upliftment and the lot of children we do have is through limiting family size.

We also agree that this is a complex issue. For example, I speak of the 'complex social dynamics within which sexual relations operate and consequent pregnancy occurs, the fact that many SA women are vulnerable and have little choice and the fact that access to family planning and abortion services are inadequate (which) combine to limit choice'. No woman, no child of 10 or 12, falling pregnant in such circumstances can be said to have acted irresponsibly. Msimang refers to 'a myriad of systemic problems children face in South Africa, especially when they are born into poverty', and enumerates some.

We agree that there is much rotten in this state of ours. I frame my views on responsible parenthood toward the end of the article:

'Because of the complexity of underlying socioeconomic factors that fall beyond the scope of this article, it would be simplistic to argue that responsible parenthood can remedy the ills described above. It can at best be seen as an ideal to strive towards, as a marker of socioeconomic development and the achievement of a certain level of development. It cannot be cherry-picked and preferentially developed outside of general socioeconomic upliftment, which should be the aim of every decent society.'

And:

'Each child should matter, and the possibilities inherent to each should be optimally developed. Family planning services should be a cornerstone to attain the latter. But so, too, should the development of the notion of responsible parenthood be an expression of responsible citizenship.'

Reproductive choice is a natural and liberal right, but it must be tempered with responsibility to produce only those children that we can care for, and our legal and moral obligations towards the children we have.'

We do seem to disagree on the actionable significance of the Constitutional rights embedded in section 28 of the Bill of Rights. Msimang argues that they are (purely) aspirational. I disagree. These rights limit parents' rights to reproduce. Surely every child has a right to family or alternative care, nutrition, shelter, protection, to have his or her well-being considered, as specifically listed. And are the parents (and not the state) not the prime providers charged to fulfil those rights? Be mindful that this is more than just a moral admonishment: the Children's Act No. 38 of 2005 makes it a criminal offence if a person who is responsible for caring for a child – in the first instance, each parent – does not provide the child with (presumably, among other things) clothes, housing and medical care. With this in mind, can it be wrong to argue that we should limit our families to the extent that we can supply the above, or at least as much as possible? That '(c)itizens' freedom of choice in reproduction is therefore limited by Constitutional and legislative measures aimed

at child protection'? The immorality of the causes of socioeconomic deprivation operates on a different level and does not absolve us from personal responsibility, even if we are poor.

Msimang's essential criticism – elevated to his title – is that I argue that 'only the elite should have children'⁽¹⁾ (my emphasis). I am tempted to opine that he is being slightly mischievous in creating a 'straw person (argument)' that he proceeds to shoot down. Where do I say that 'poor people should not have children', that 'only the elite' should? Where do I 'suggest' 'that we should create programmes to steer poor people away from child rearing'? This is a far cry from what in fact I wrote: that the state 'has a responsibility to intervene by designing and initiating programmes to promote responsible parenthood within social development'. It should be obvious that these can only be educational programmes. If I'd argued what Msimang suggests I had, I would have joined his ranks. I think my argument is much more nuanced. However, it would be disingenuous to hold that financial considerations have no role to play in the real world. We have to cut the cloth to suit the purse. Note that while stating this fact of life, I do not argue that it is the ideal, good, or right, or that the poor should not reproduce. There is no doubt that smaller families go hand in hand with socioeconomic advancement, improving the lot of those we should care most about – our children.

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