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Breastpump technology and 'natural' motherly milk in Enlightenment France

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the development of breastfeeding technology in eighteenth-century France and its place in broader public debates over the virtues of maternal breastfeeding and the state's role in stimulating population growth at a time of (perceived) demographic crisis. Our discussion attends to the breadth of historical actors with stakes in the century's ongoing breastfeeding debate–mothers, midwives, wetnurses, infants, and scientific tinkers–as well as the broader social and moral concerns that fuelled them. It pays particular attention to gender dynamics, including the tensions and collaborations which coloured the relationships between the men who developed and marketed breastpump technologies to female consumers, while proselytising their views on the virtues of breastfeeding and motherly milk. We highlight instrument makers' role in developing artificial feeding aids in order to empower mothers and their suckling infants to practice a "natural" human activity, while also remaining critical of their aims and commercial interests.

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Introduction

The scientific instrument-maker Jacques Bianchi regularly welcomed visitors to the two instrument shops he operated on either side of the Palais-Royal in the aristocratic quarter of Paris. One of his visitors in 1785 was the Marquis de Bon, a gentleman versed in physics, and, as Bianchi quickly learned, a new father. The Marquis lamented that his wife's smooth passage into motherhood had been hampered by the sharp chest pains she experienced on account of her engorged breasts. Bianchi listened with sympathy and disappeared for a moment to his workshop before returning with a breastpump. He offered this ingenious machine to the Marquis as a solution to his wife's nursing woes, confident that the pump would siphon the festering milk into a receptacle and relieve her pain. The device was a celebrated success in the Marquis' household and soon piqued the interest of a court visitor, Queen Marie-Antoinette's *accoucheur* (man-midwife), Monsieur de Vermont. Soon thereafter, Bianchi received the royal man-midwife at his workshop and was flattered into submitting his invention to the Paris Royal Academy of Surgery for its endorsement. The Academy assigned a two-man commission to test out the instrument's efficacy on a number of wetnurses registered with the city's *Bureau des Recommanderesses* (Bureau of recommenders) (Pancoucke, Tome 10, 1789, p. 593–598). With the Academy's stamp of approval, and orders coming in from physicians, surgeons, and man-midwives, Bianchi issued a ten-page pamphlet describing the utility of his machine. By the time the advertisement came to press, he had passed away, and his widow had assumed sole responsibility for the commercial side of his legacy (Rozier and Blainville, 1785, p. 198–199).

Mechanical tinkers like Bianchi do not normally figure in histories of eighteenth-century infant feeding. This is in part because their central characters are the morally righteous breastfeeding proselytisers, "corrupted" wetnurses, and misguided new mothers. It may also be because the history of breastfeeding in Enlightenment France has been persuasively developed through the "mentalities" tradition of the Annales School, with its emphasis on reconstructing social attitudes to breastfeeding and uncovering the relationships between maternity, wetnursing, infant health, and demography (Burke, 1990, p. 1–93). This viewpoint has provided an enriching methodological framework borne out in several important articles published in the *Annales de Démographie Historique* addressing the broader theme of the history of childcare. These studies appearing in the 1970s and 1980s were followed by several English-language accounts of wetnursing that rounded out this 'moment' in the historiography. Of these, Sussman's account makes the case that the commercialisation of wetnursing in France began during the Old Regime and continued into the twentieth century (Fauve-Chamoux, 1983, p. 7–22; Gutierrez & Houdaille, 1983, p. 975–994; Morel, 1976, p. 393–426; Reverzy & Montel, 1983, p. 723–232; Senior, p. 1983, 367–388; Sussman, 1982, p. 19–35).

Comparatively few studies of infant feeding were undertaken in the 1990s, though Mary Jacobus' feminist account in cultural context and Marylynn Salmon's comparative study stand out (Jacobus; Salmon). The history of infant feeding has more recently been subsumed in broader narratives concerning state formation, the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement, and reproduction politics. Carol Blum's

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Strength in Numbers (2002) is the primary example of this orientation and gives new flourish to the demographic interest of Annales School scholarship. Blum examines how France's perception of population decline led to a national fertility crisis that gave rise to a pronatalist campaign driven by Enlightenment intellectuals known as the philosophes. Thinkers as diverse in their ideas as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot articulated solutions to the population crisis that included social reform and a return to "natural" motherhood. The Crown was in part the target of such critiques, but also part of the solution: its genuine concern over depopulation lead to the implementation of measures to curb high rates of infant mortality and improve the safety of the birthing milieu (Blum, 2002, p. 11–113). Leslie Tuttle has more recently traced the emergence of pronatalist legislation as a manifestation of French state formation (Tuttle, 2010, p. 17–62, 101–124).

The French population crisis of the late eighteenth century problematised by historians like Blum provides a valuable framework for updating the history of infant feeding pioneered by Annales scholars. In many ways, these contributions comprise two sides of the same coin: breastfeeding was understood to curb infant mortality and produce strong, resilient adults to people the nation. And indeed, many of the actors central to Blum's depopulation narrative also agitated in favour of maternal breastfeeding. One aspect of the breastfeeding discourse is nonetheless absent in available histories. That is the role played by inventors like Bianchi, who in providing medical technology to new mothers, uncover the tension between the social prescription to breastfeed and the practical difficulty of doing so. The emphasis on prescription over practice is partly indicative of the limits of the primary source material—the viewpoints of mothers are not easily uncovered and as a result sorely absent from much of the literature. However, at least one of these viewpoints can be reconstructed in the context of medical technology and its role in facilitating women's commitment to infant feeding by extending this "natural" practice.

This paper examines how entrepreneurs like Bianchi and likeminded medical practitioners conceptualised breastfeeding in much the same way as childbirth: as a mechanical process to be rationalised, and where necessary, corrected through right implements. My aim is to demonstrate how the repertoire of infant feeding devices that proliferated in the last quarter of the century assumed a new and important place in regimes of infant care. They received the attention of an increasingly commercialised marketplace, scientific academies, and the medical establishment. The invention of the breastpump was the outgrowth of a confluence of interrelated shifts of cultural, social, and economic magnitude. That is, the maternalisation of breastfeeding and breastmilk, the commercialisation of medical goods, and the increased purchasing power of the aspirational middle class. The pioneers of breastpump technology capitalised on the maternal imperative in order to create a niche market of feeding aids. In this process of commodification, the increasing moral value attached to mother's milk extended to the infant, who assumed a new and important role in reproduction politics as future citizen. Educational tracts and medical gazettes were the primary platform by and through which maternal feeding was debated and the breastpump in particular was popularised. The development of infant feeding discourse within such sources also attests to the broader claim that the rise in everyday comforts was a part of a late Enlightenment script of technological progress.

Breastfeeding the nation

While the practice of wetnursing was at the heart of the commercialisation of infant feeding, it was vigorously challenged as a practice by campaigners as varied as medical practitioners, Enlightenment philosophes, and a new category of health officials. These groups voiced their opposition to wetnursing on moral, medical, and demographic grounds. Among the voices hailing from the medical community was Mme Le Rebours (1731–1821), who after witnessing the death of infants abandoned to wetnurses, penned the multi-edition manifesto *Avis aux mères qui veulent nourrir leurs enfans* (Advice to mothers wishing to nurse their infants). It was first published in 1767. In this advice book, she presented nursing as a natural and instinctual process that converted into a social virtue, if only because its practice had been eroded by popular convention:

> [t]he animal instinct that brings mothers to take care of their offspring is no virtue in the state of nature; but the fact of not straying from this instinct in spite of the circumstances that conspire to stifle it in the state of society, that is a virtue.
>
> [(Le Rebours, 1798, p. 120)][1]

Le Rebours exhausted the list of reasons why women might choose *not* to nurse—from the practical (spousal complaints) to the physical (pain and exhaustion)—all the while maintaining that nursing was the right and natural course for new mothers. She conceded that only women whose circumstances placed them in the proximity of the ill or in domestic service were exempt from this duty (Le Rebours, 1798, p. 51–52). Le Rebours' invective appeared particularly persuasive because she had witnessed firsthand both the abuses of wetnurses and the virtues of maternal feeding.

Enlightened discourse on maternal nursing exemplified by *Avis aux mères* reached a new high in printed literature during the last quarter of the century owing to the pronatalist sentiment it shared with other stakeholders—the philosophes, state officials, and physicians concerned over France's declining population. Maternal milk, so it was argued, nourished a thriving people in both the physiological and metaphorical senses, and in the process undermined the apparently corrupted "mercenary" or wetnurse milk that had for too long thwarted infant survival (Gilibert, Volume 2, 1770, p. 245–254). But feeding was only one of many alternatives to solving the perceived population crisis. For the philosophes, lifting the outmoded restrictions on sexual activity imposed by the Catholic Church would stimulate population growth. This included putting an end to clerical celibacy and premature widowhood, and releasing spouses from unhappy marriages by sanctioning divorce. The philosophes also propounded theories of socialisation in which "natural man," denuded of social convention and the trappings of civility, achieved his true potential (Rousseau, Volume 4, 1859–1969, p. 254–264). By extension, the "natural mother" was she who suckled her infant, thereby setting him on the virtuous path to achieving his full potential as enlightened citizen. The identification of the value of the child as recipient of his or her mother's milk was a key justification of and explanation for the maternalisation of lactation (Orland, 2014, p. 129–31; Schiebinger, 2004, p. 40–74).

At the same time that freethinkers attacked Church doctrine and social custom for inhibiting natural reproduction, a band of health officials crusaded to uproot prejudices in medical practice deemed responsible for population decline. Their efforts to reinvigorate France's declining population were part of a century-long (1750–1850) transformation in public health (Quinlan, 2007, p. 19–86). One facet of early efforts was to streamline midwifery pedagogy in order to spare lives unnecessarily lost during childbirth. The most important of these was the botched births overseen by ignorant peasant midwives. The Crown responded to this longstanding problem in 1759 by tasking the midwife Mme du Coudray with travelling to the provinces in order to train midwives of both sexes in the art of birthing on her famous simulative dummies (Anonymous, *Lettre d'un Citoyen*, 1777, n.p.; Ratner Gelbart, 1998, p. 90–135). While King Louis XV's midwife toured rural France, pronatalist physicians and midwives joined the chorus of campaigners seeking to promote in writings and implement in practice a variety of postpartum measures designed to improve infant survival rates. The most important of these was to stamp out the widespread use of surrogate mothers in favour of maternal feeding. This campaign was led through medical literature condemning surrogate feeders as individually uncouth, opportunistic sorts in the business of trading in sickly,

[1] Note that this translation and those throughout are my own.