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WE CARE ABOUT CHILDREN

Alexandre Couture Gagnon

In everyday language, survival means not physically dying. The definition implies a focus on the individual. When applied to humans as a group or as groups, survival takes a different meaning. Do we care about the survival of our species, of all human beings? Or do we care about the survival of only those with whom we share our patriotism? Or perhaps we care only about the children belonging to our family, thus we care only about our own descendants? Based on my own experience and my research, I think that we care deeply about children, much more so than we care about adults. In what follows, I offer three examples of this phenomenon: the interminable advice that strangers give to pregnant women; the (non-) welcoming of most refugees and, in parallel, the acute attention for young refugees; and the concern within minority nations (or groups of people who feel the future of their identity is threatened within their countries) for future generations.

While pregnant for the first time, I was struck on a daily basis by the care that others showed for the future of my daughter. Strangers asked if they could touch my belly, friends of friends offered gifts for the baby to come. Everyone wanted to help. Taking the plane became enjoyable: there were many offers to lift my carry-on to the bin above seats, agents gave me extra snacks and water, people moved around me, smiled kindly, and congratulated me without even mentioning the baby (we all knew what their wishes referred to). Then, of course, it seemed very hard for those same complete strangers not to give a piece of advice, some outdated, usually not based on facts. You should not fly, the air pressure is bad for the fetus. Buy this one toy or CD to stimulate your kid's brain, otherwise you will raise a nincompoop. Your baby will need a warm blanket and bumpers for her crib. (Check out the website of the American Academy of Paediatrics (2017). These are now big no-nos aimed at preventing sudden infant death syndrome.) Overall, recommendations coming from all directions had one intention: making sure the little one survives in this world. These everyday interactions when my belly was protruding lead me to believe that we humans really care about the future of our species' offspring. It explains the tender kindness that almost everyone shows around pregnant mothers (and perhaps the observation that science seems pushed aside for the sake of tradition).

How do we compare these concerns about our apparently communal children to our care for refugees? As I write, the world has never recorded higher numbers of refugees and people forced to run away from where they used to live. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that "[an] unprecedented 65.6 million people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 22.5 million refugees" (UNCHR 2017). Humans have failed in the past to protect their peers. To recall one famous example, in 1939, the Saint Louis ship was refused in Cuba, Canada, and the U.S., on the basis of prejudices against its Jewish passengers being spies (Gross 2015). Unfortunately, we might be repeating our past mistakes with current refugees. According to UNCHR, only 189,300 refugees had resettled in 2016. Yet we care about kids. The refugees that have attracted attention and commanded action by our governments in the last years are the little ones: the tiny Aylan Kurdi, drowned on a Greek beach (Barnard and Shoumali 2015), and the five-year-old Omran Daqneesh, covered in blood in a Syrian ambulance (Barnard 2016). These pictures have moved us, arguably more than the ones of cramped refugee camps or destroyed cities. As with pregnant women, refugees show that we care about the future of the human race — through kids.

Let me juxtapose this concern for the survival of the species' offspring to minority nations. Minority nations are "groups that formed functioning societies, with their own institutions, culture, and language, concentrated in a particular territory, prior to being incorporated into a larger state. The incorporation of such national minorities is usually involuntary, as a result of colonization, conquest, or the ceding of territory from one imperial power to another, but may also occur voluntarily, through some treaty or other federative agreement" (Kymlicka 2001, p.72). Catalonia, Québec, the Basque country, Flanders, Scotland are emblematic examples in industrialized countries. One can now live in French in Québec and access a higher socio-economic status than someone who does not speak the language. Kids attend French schools, hospitals function in French (a few hospitals are designated for the Anglophone community), government services are in French, advertising is predominantly in French, businesses of more than 50 employees ought to work in French, and universities teach almost exclusively in French (except for McGill, Concordia, and Bishop's Universities, as well as some specific courses in other universities). Citizens whose mother-tongue is not French are ever increasingly learning the language (OQLF 2016, p.24-5). Yet Québécois still want more linguistic rights and are still afraid that their Francophone language, culture, and identity will die off. One cannot rationally claim that French survival is in danger in the short term in Québec. Québécois who are currently alive will not be living in English before they pass away. But the fear of assimilation is real. It transcends Québec politics. Theorists explain this strong group will to maintain an identity across time as intrinsically pertaining to the nature of nations (Wendt 1999), as a last chance to safeguard a culture before globalization smoothens differences (Dieckhoff 2000) or as a protection against external aggression (Wallerstein 1991). I think the explanation lies in the group's care for its offspring: adults think their group's descendants will be more fulfilled if they adhere to their identity rather than embrace the majority's identity. Based on the idea that one's roots are what grounds someone, what allows one to grow and thrive, adult members of the group are willing to fight for their unknown offspring's happiness.

The general concern that we share for little ones, from our lands or from afar, can seem to contradict the protective concern that citizens of minority nations have for the future dwellers of their territory. While the first two examples show care for all human kids, the last example refers to kids of a specific political entity (the minority nation). Yet citizens of minority nations also care about pregnant women's bellies and feel the same pain when seeing kids from other lands suffering. It depends on which group one belongs to at a certain time. When one thinks of one's group as all humans, one cares about all babies, no matter where they are; when one reflects on the future of one's descendants — likely to reside in the same autonomous community (Catalonia, the Basque country), community (Flanders), province (Québec) or semi-independent country (Scotland) as one does — one cares about these children. We are able to duplicate our group's sense of belonging, based on whose group's survival calls our attention at that moment. One thing remains: humans' survival is largely focused on children.

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