

## A Modest Proposal

### Introduction

During the growth of Agricultural and then the following Industrial Revolution, the quality and quantity of food produced increased tremendously. A by-product of the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions was an increase in population. People continued having children at high rates, but children were not dying, due in part to more food, at the rates they had in the past. At first this was a blessing as these children grew to be workers in the new factories. But soon there were far more children than would ever be necessary for the increasingly mechanized society that was developing. Many families began to starve and a great debate began as to how to deal with this population of poor people. Many politicians seriously called for forced sterilization of mothers and other harsh means. This greatly irritated some individuals who responded in various ways. One of those responses is "A Modest Proposal" by a British poet/author of this time, Jonathan Swift. Swift was an Irishman by birth as well as an Anglican (Church of England) Clergyman who instead of being appointed Bishop in England, was appointed Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral (Church of England) in Dublin. It was while serving in this position that he wrote this work in 1729.

### A

### MODEST PROPOSAL FOR PREVENTING THE CHILDREN OF POOR PEOPLE FROM BEING A BURDEN TO THEIR PARENTS OR THE COUNTRY, AND FOR MAKING THEM BENEFICIAL TO THE PUBLIC

#### Excerpt #1

I think it is agreed by all parties that this prodigious number of children, in the arms, or on the backs, or at the heels of their mothers, and frequently of their fathers, is *in the present deplorable state of the kingdom*, a very great additional grievance; and therefore whoever could find out a fair, cheap and easy method of making these children sound useful members of the commonwealth would deserve so well of the public, as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation.

But my intention is very far from being confined to provide only for the children of *professed beggars*, it is of a much greater extent, and shall take in the whole number of infants at a certain age, who are born of parents in effect as little able to support them as those who demand our charity in the streets.

As to my own part, having turned my thoughts for many years upon this important subject, and maturely weighed the *several schemes of other projectors*, I have always found them grossly mistaken in their computation. It is true a child *just dropped from its dam* may be supported by her milk for a solar year with little other nourishment, at most not above the value of two shillings. . . .

#### Excerpt #2

I am assured by our merchants that a boy or a girl, before twelve years old, is no saleable commodity, and even when they come to this age, they will not yield above three pounds, or three pounds and half-a-crown at most on the Exchange, which cannot turn to account either to the parents or the kingdom, the charge of nutriment and rags having been at least four times that value.

I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection.

I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child, well nursed, is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether *stewed, roasted, baked or boiled*, and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a *fricassee*, or a *ragout*.

### Excerpt #3

I do therefore humbly offer it to *public consideration*, that of the hundred and twenty thousand children, already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for breed, whereof only one fourth part to be males, which is more than we allow to *sheep, black-cattle or swine*; and my reason is that these children are seldom the fruits of marriage, a *circumstance not much regarded by our savages*; therefore *one male* will be sufficient to serve *four females*. That the remaining hundred thousand may at a year old be offered in sale to the *persons of quality and fortune*, through the kingdom, always advising the mother to let them suck plentifully of the last month, so as to render them plump and fat for a good table. A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends, and when the family dines alone the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt will be very good boiled in the fourth day, especially in *winter*.

I have reckoned upon a medium, that a child just born will weigh 12 pounds, and in a solar year if tolerably nursed increased to 28 pounds.

I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very *proper for landlords*, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.

Infants' flesh will be in season through the year, but more plentiful in *March*, and a little before and after, for we are told by a grave author, an eminent French physician, that *fish being a prolific diet*, there are more children born in *Roman Catholic countries* about nine months after *Lent*, the markets will be more glutted than usual, because the number of *Popish infants* is at least three to one in this kingdom, and therefore it will have one other collateral advantage by lessening the number of *Papists* among us.

### Excerpt #4

I have too long digressed, and therefore shall return to my subject. I think the advantages by the proposal which I have made are obvious and many, as well as of the highest importance.

For *first*, as I have already observed, it would greatly lessen the *number of Papists*, with whom we are yearly over-run, being the principal breeders of the nation as well as our most dangerous enemies, and who stay at home on purpose with a design to *deliver the kingdom to the Pretender*; hoping to take their advantage by the absence of *so many good Protestants*, who have chosen rather to leave their country than stay at home and pay tithes *against* their conscience to an *Episcopal curate*.

*Secondly*, the poorer tenants will have something valuable of their own, which by law may be made liable to distress, and help to pay their landlord's rent, their corn and cattle being already seized, and *money a thing unknown*.

*Thirdly*, whereas the maintenance of a hundred thousand children, from two years old and upwards, cannot be computed at less than ten shillings a piece *per annum*, besides the profit of a new dish introduced to the tables of all *gentlemen of fortune* in the kingdom who have any refinement in taste; and the money will circulate among ourselves, the goods being entirely of our own growth and manufacture

*Fourthly*, the constant breeders, besides the gain of eight shillings *sterling per annum* by the sale of their children, will be rid of the charge of maintaining them after the first year.

*Fifthly*, this food would likewise bring great *custom to taverns*, where the vintners will certainly be so prudent as to procure the best receipts for dressing it to perfection, and consequently have their houses frequented by all the *fine gentlemen*, who justly value themselves upon their knowledge in good eating; and a skillful cook, who understands how to oblige his guests, will contrive to make it as expensive as they please.<sup>1</sup>

### Questions on the Readings:

1. What is Swift's "Modest Proposal" about?
2. What does Swift want to make these children into?
3. What does Swift seem to be concerned with the cost of?
4. What does Swift suggest should be done with these children, when the cost of feeding them outweighs their contribution to society?
5. Does he believe that all children should be treated this way? What should happen to about 20,000 of every 120,000 (1/6)?
6. What are some of the suggestions for serving the child? Explain.
7. Who will this food be most proper for? Why?
8. What group of religious individuals will be largely removed from society? Why is there such a large group of these children?

<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1984), 492–496.

