

Social space and differentials of fertility (19th–20th centuries)

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The first and second ‘demographic transitions’ are often thought of as single and necessary paths inexorably leading the populations and groups who constitute them towards a common horizon. But numerous forms of heterogeneity – between centres and peripheries, rich and poor, nationals and immigrants, men and women, etc. – resist such simplification even though the elements of opposition vary in their nature, in their definition, and over time. Overly generic analytical frameworks (such as the modernizing perspective of the mid-twentieth century and, more recently, diffusionism) have already been widely criticized for their political and normative implicitness despite the fact that population history and historical demographics have yet to liberate themselves from such generalization. Dialogue with other disciplines, including sociology and social history, has enabled progress to be made in terms of how to historicize and contextualize these issues. It prompts us not simply to focus on the objective deployment of processes, the relative speed of their ‘completion’, or the undeniable convergence of certain curves (Dribe, Hacker, and Scalzone 2014), but to document and understand how they are embodied sociologically, the strategies that underlie them, and the social significations (absolute or relative) attached to these practices and behaviour.

This issue seeks to reconnect population and social structure. The latter, however, is always complicated to pin down and conceptualize. We cannot confine ourselves to the use of a flat, disembodied stratification that ignores conflicts and power relations, mutual representations (especially in the form ‘them and us’), or individual or collective interactions: the social history of populations we propose here is not a classificatory undertaking, even enriched with models of mobility or diffusion. It cannot be satisfied with an objectivist morphology, disconnected from any historical problematization. Because it is history, it does not claim to depict a fixed stratification but tries to capture polarities *in situation*; to illuminate actions and their effects. Rather than looking for an idealistic essence of groups, we propose to combine angles of attack to compare theoretical groups, groups on paper or statistics, with practices observed.

The obvious increase in inequalities since the 1990s and the replay of the social question, involving the clash between the shattering of socioeconomic statuses and situations, the assertion of minorities and the individualist paradigm that is accompanying the neoliberal groundswell, have generated a new momentum in human and social sciences research. Current research is moving away from the idea of convergence to an average, just as it is distancing itself from the atomistic and utilitarian dimensions of microeconomics. However, this resurgence of interest in social (group) relationships – to which historians cannot remain indifferent – raises a number of questions. The study of behaviour, norms, and demographic events may constitute a good anchor point for guarding against both *a priori* categorizations and overfascile assumptions. But it is never without risk when historians reopen the debate on social structure (see, in particular, the discussion in Prost 2014). We therefore need to exercise caution to avoid the methodological vagaries of the past. To do so, we must start by defining our terms: without revisiting the entire history of the semantic and theoretical debates on the subject, we have decided to differentiate

between the relatively neutral and flexible notion of ‘social groups’ and that of ‘social classes’, which will be reserved for situations in which class consciousness, mobilization, and/or conflict are evident. Then, using the knowledge acquired over recent decades in sociology and social history, we can try to inject other lines of division into the analysis (level of education; kinship and history of families; geographical origins; religious insertion and involvement; ‘private’ vs ‘public’ sector employees; workers with a ‘status’ vs those in precarious or short-term employment; etc.), which, in terms of family and/or demographic behaviour, may prove as determinant as assumed or apparent macrosocial affiliations. Lastly, we must also avoid restricting questioning to the overly exclusive theme of domination (or, more recently, of ‘intersectionality’), making sure that we guard against any populist or miserabilist temptation.

From these diverse points of entry, we have selected fertility for the purposes of this collective volume. Are the beds of the poor more prolific than those of the rich? Isn’t this well-worn idea – which has persisted since Malthus to the present day (for example, Clark 2007), via eugenist literature but also the analyses of Bourdieu and Darbel (1966) on the baby boom (attentive to the differential values of groups) – merely unfair simplification? The ‘U-curve’ model of fertility, so widely referenced and asserted, has rarely been examined critically and is actually based on a presupposition, that of the primacy of sexuality as a fact of nature and on the relative distance from biological necessities that characterizes different social categories according to their degree of civilization or their propensity to plan for the future (Bourdieu and Darbel turn this logic on its head because in their analysis, conception is a choice). The ‘beds of the poor’, places of intemperance leading to excess progeny; the ‘beds of the rich’, where the succession of the estate is prepared; and between these two, the far-sighted middle classes, obsessed with social advancement: Malthusians, neo-Malthusians, eugenists, and natalists have, for two centuries, widely fuelled this type of representation on which they rarely disagreed. Firstly, this approach raises issues of historical realism. As such, the reappraisal of large-scale fertility studies in Great Britain in the late nineteenth century and the detailed re-examination of the 1911 census data carried out by Simon Szreter (1996) has enabled the latter to refute the premise that the fertility levels of the British are closely correlated with class. Pulling apart an intellectual construct anchored in eugenics and reinforced by the traditional theory of demographic transition, Szreter dismantled this ‘artefact created by aggregation’ and creates a ‘high-resolution’ breakdown that, he claims, is closer to the reality. By extending the ideas put forward by Szreter, we can explore the factors related to occupational or geographical community, to family, and even to school socialization. But the criticisms levelled against Szreter’s book also offer food for thought. Charles Tilly, in particular, reproached its author for yielding to a ‘particularist’ approach where he should have looked, using a coherent sociological framework, for regularities (Tilly 1996). More recently, Barnes and Guinnane (2012) have plunged into Szreter’s data and have refuted part of his analyses: although some continuity did exist between contiguous categories, the core values of each class were very distinct.

These days, fertility behaviour is no longer explained simply in terms of control and maximizing calculation, as opposed to short-sightedness and irresponsibility. They can also be studied through the prism of practical rationality (Zelizer 1994), as compensation for the hardships of life, or even as means of insertion or social recognition (Schwartz 2012). One of the central aims of this dossier is to understand the extent to which economic calculations guide or, specifically, do not guide the decision to have a child or to have a certain number of children (the two may be combined as a first approximation but should definitely be distinguished subsequently). This question may be approached from various directions. Initially, we need to confront the economists’ almost automatic determiner in which parents optimize their resources (over their lifetime) taking into consideration the cost of raising each child and any income they

may bring (including in the form of assistance in old age or other). But we should also go further: children can be a source of affection, power, network, respectability; at the same time, they can create a set of symbolic and material costs that are damaging to status and therefore to social mobility. More fundamentally, we need to study them *in relation* to other areas of individual and household life: how reproductive ‘choices’ connect in practice with budget calculations; how the cost-benefit logic is understood in ordinary experience; how pay or social benefits (including family allowances), as well as schooling and extended studies, organize financial behaviour. On other levels, what can we learn about social divisions from birth restriction practices (including infanticide) or even the preference for male children? Has birth restriction actually been a source of social mobility? We must not overlook the role of norms, as illustrated by the stigma of the large working-class family (De Luca Barrusse 2008).

Another means of pushing past the reduction of the household to an autonomous and optimizing decision-making unit involves bringing in other intermediaries: local or not, direct or indirect, institutional or informal; from midwives to family planning officers via friendship networks, they enable us to explore the actual mechanisms by which couples connect – or come to connect – financial constraints and fertility practices. This avenue for reflection will involve these actors at different levels, sociocultural intermediaries (Hilevych 2016), childminders, and other medical intermediaries. These elements suggest approaches for rethinking both the (apparent) link between social group and fertility, as well as the (also apparent) linearity of the fall in fertility.

Another approach will involve using a longitudinal (or life course) framework to examine how economic resources can influence fertility choices (decisions or non-decisions). Financial pressures can apply differently at various times according to social groups; they can therefore be much less significant over the life course than at a moment t . In other words, poor people restrict their fertility more at times of financial pressure – which is then observed in the cross-section – but this effect disappears if we look at the whole life.

One final approach, lastly, will focus on how internal differentiations – diversity based on nationality, occupation, or place of residence, for example – may serve as relevant cases studies (rather than being instantly perceived as refutations or residues). In this framework, atypical situations should allow us to glimpse the mechanisms by which the social position of individuals influences, or not, their fertility practices. *In fine*, instead of confining ourselves to seeking causes to explain dependent variables (such as number of children, birth rate, or the synthetic fertility index), we should consider fertility in a relational manner. A good example of this approach is that of practices such as contraception, abortion, and even infanticide – see, for example, the analysis of Japanese fertility over 300 years by Fabian Drixler (2013) which places infanticide within the framework of fertility practices by closely studying the entanglement between politics, discourse, practices, and perceptions.

This call is aimed as much at historians (social, economic, gender, etc.) as at demographers. In particular, we think that it is by using original sources, off-centre situations, and combinations of different types of survey materials that we can shed light on new aspects of sociodemographic reality.

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