

REPRODUCTION AND SURVIVAL IN AN UNKNOWN WORLD

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This is an excerpt from a larger analysis in which Coleman explores a wide range of possible theories about influences on contemporary fertility levels in industrial societies. The passages below examine the role of economic factors and changing values in explaining fertility levels. Among many challenging observations Coleman notes that in the 1970s women in European societies with high levels of workforce participation tended to have fewer births. But, by the 1990s, this relationship had reversed.

ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY

The achievements and problems of economic models, notably the dominant New Home Economics/Chicago school, are too well known to rehearse here in detail. Economic trends and relative workforce participation and wage rates of men and women can account, sometimes badly, sometimes well, for post-war trends in fertility and in marriage in individual countries.

At least the issue of economic change itself, and the rationality of individual behaviour on material matters, do not present major conceptual problems. Family formation as with other major decisions in human life, is demonstrably influenced by rational choices responding to material concerns. Malthusian or early Easterlin models, which could fit earlier patterns of behaviour, were confounded by the rise of a factor which they had excluded — women's contribution to work, family income and decision-making. But in turn New Home Economic models, which incorporate such changes, have lost power as new actors, not included in the original cast, have moved onto the scene. Where female workforce participation rates are high, their effect on fertility becomes saturated and lose force. Work and child-bearing, once thought to be incompatible, may be ceasing to be so. As elsewhere in Europe's economy, net costs of child-

bearing are not just influenced by the labour market but through subsidy — by welfare and tax arrangements and by legislation affecting employment, which can change the rules of the rationality of choice. In Sweden in the late 1980s simple social security reform had people scurrying back to marriage, even if only temporarily, to pick up the benefits.¹ Hence the perverse cross-sectional relationship between aggregate national levels of women's workforce participation and fertility; in the 1970s the countries of Europe showed the expected negative relationship; by 1990 they had the answer completely wrong: countries with high female workforce participation, on the whole, have higher birth rates.

State intervention on welfare in ways that affect the birth rate — however unintentionally — move fertility away from the realm of the market and into the world of subsidies. With governments disposing of between 40 and 55 per cent of national GDP in most Western European countries it could hardly be otherwise. Until Europe has a Common Procreational Policy, we will have problems making international comparisons. We may estimate the effects over time of welfare changes in one country, for example in Sweden. But because of the great variety of tax and welfare systems, unambiguous effects upon national fertility differences have been difficult to demonstrate, at least within

Western Europe.² A second complication is that levels of welfare and tax arrangements in democracies are not exogenous. They follow — however imperfectly — from the values and attitudes of the population itself expressed through elections and political consensus. These historical and political processes generate characteristics and different welfare systems in different countries, and therefore different material incentives for family formation,³ take us straight back to values and attitudes.

The inertia of values and politics ensure that it takes time for demands by women for a new deal at work and at home to be reflected in appropriate institutional change. But ‘maturation’ of women’s social and economic participation may eventually ‘harmonise’ institutions (parental leave and compensations) with these demands and reduce incompatibilities between them.⁴ Sweden and Norway are now in such a ‘mature’ state with women in employment just as likely to progress to a third child as those who keep house.⁵ On this view, Southern Europe is not yet ‘mature’ and neither is Japan. There, respondents to surveys claim that higher income and wife’s employment strongly depressed the likelihood of progressing to a third child but that an increase in child allowance or other measures to harmonize work and family life would make them think again.⁶

Mechanisms which work in Western Europe and Japan ought to work outside it. How then do we account for the parallel changes — at least up till about 1990 — in Scandinavian and in Neo-European fertility rates — as well as similar high levels of divorce and cohabitation — given the much lower level of public sector welfare support for children in the United States, a country well-known also to be a madhouse of

religion? But in the US it is the private sector which has responded to the pressures and demands from women that in the Scandinavian countries have been translated into public welfare change. In the US the service sector and shift work have become more prominent, the requirement that women care for their own children most of the time has weakened, having children when single is more acceptable, and with it a weakening of the male role. Together these have lessened the contradictions between childbearing and work. Private, not public, sector child-care has advanced accordingly in a much more open labour market.⁷ As women earn more, they can afford to support more children through their own efforts via paid child care.

It may be that the private sector, in a flexible economy and labour market such as that of the US, can respond to new demands for services faster and more efficiently than the more sclerotic socialised systems of Europe. Furthermore private sector systems might be more sustainable. The recent cut-back in the Swedish system, part of a global contraction, suggests that some public sector systems of child support may not be sustainable, especially in the face of competing demands from an ageing population. Maybe that helps to account for the generally higher level of US fertility post-war. In Sweden the tight linkage of welfare benefits to workforce participation supported fertility when the going was good but amplified the effect of economic downturn when the Swedish full employment and benefits party ended in the early 1990s, provoking a sharp fall in the birth rate.⁸

ATTITUDE PROBLEMS

An alternative approach to explaining modern demographic patterns and trends

through fundamental changes in values and attitudes has been more or less invented in the Low Countries. It has proved highly successful and in demography constitutes a form of ideological transition in its own right. Psychologists have suggested several independent dimensions whereby individuals, and national populations on average,⁹ differ from each other in ways that may influence economic and social behaviour. Ever since students of the demographic transition found to their delight that variation of the onset of transition was in many cases closely linked to the cultural or linguistic map of Europe, 'culture' and its associated differences in values and behaviour has offered an exciting but frustrating alternative to economic models of demographic differences and trends. Exciting because it promised to go where economics plainly could not reach. Frustrating because while offering at least a framework of correlation for differences in patterns of behaviour or the acceptance of new ones, it cannot account for its own change, nor easily provide a specific mechanism for its influence on demographically measured behaviour.

'Post-materialism' is just one of several models of value change which has been influential in demography. At their centre is a preference for individualistic self-realisation and the satisfaction of personal preferences, made possible by the emancipation from material concerns in modern prosperous societies¹⁰ and the growth of choice among an educated population more free from the power of traditional sources of authority.¹¹ Its genesis roots it firmly in the massive economic and educational advances of prosperous middle 20th century post-industrial welfare society and differentiates it from the earlier ideological and

cultural changes — also iconoclastic but decidedly materially-oriented — which helped to propel the first demographic transition in fertility.

'Materialism' and other value dimensions (familism, religiosity) relating to family, religion, received authority and tradition are now widely accepted as helping to account for new directions in family life in modern Europe. Cultural patterns offer valuable correlations for the timing of vital events and differentials, even if they do not explain them. Explanations based on value change offer persuasive models of the recent flight from marriage and adoption of new ways of living in Europe.¹² However, there are problems. Across much of the range of human behaviour, attitude variables of all kinds tend to be statistically relatively poor predictors of individual behaviour. Critics point out that 'post-materialism' on the criteria of Inglehart may amount to little more than a position on a conservative/liberal dimension, and may only flourish because others pay the bill through taxation to pay for welfare systems. That variable has little to say about the trends or patterns of fertility at national aggregate level, accounting neither for low fertility of 'familist' Southern Europe nor for high fertility among otherwise relentlessly progressive Scandinavians.

The spread of 'post-materialist' attitudes since the 1970s has certainly gone hand in hand with rises in cohabitation, childbearing outside marriage, delayed marriage and high divorce rates. But birth rates have often not moved in the same direction. For example: in 20 industrial countries in 1993 there was a weak ($r^2=0.163$) but positive, not negative, association between total divorce rate and total fertility rate. Analyses are per force based on data going back no earlier than

1973. Because post-materialism has its supposed origins in economic change, all roads lead back to economics, and established attitudes may prove volatile in the face of economic downturns.

The message from the Eurobarometer surveys of EU countries is a familiar one. For example, averaging over all countries and all years from 1972, 'post-materialists' after suitable corrections for age, are about three times as likely as materialists to be cohabiting rather than married. Within most countries in the Eurobarometer survey, for example, there is a satisfactory simple relationship and trend between the increase in the proportion of the population who claim post-materialist attitudes and the proportion cohabiting from the late 1970s. However, in cross-sectional comparisons these attitudes may account for little of the international differences in actual behaviour. And the more disaggregated the data, the less that 'post-materialists' behave as they should. Looking at individual data, and correcting for age, only France among the EU countries showed a consistent connection between individual post-materialist sentiments and individual cohabiting behaviour both in 1980 and in 1992. However, even after correction for religiosity and other factors, national differences in attitudes to marriage cannot account for much of the substantial differences between countries in actual cohabitation.

There is a certain self-defeating aspect to 'post-materialism' and other measures of value shift. If materialists have more children, and if values cross generations, then post-materialism will die out like an ill-flavoured gene unless it makes enough converts. 'Post-materialist' values also contain the seeds of their own destruction through economics. National values are reflected in welfare institutions and thereby with the economy. Some of the

choices made by 'post-materialists' may be free of cost to them. But they impose costs on others. In some countries, lone motherhood depends substantially on state support — in the UK £4 billion per year not including subsidized public housing. Divorce generates two households where one existed before and in the UK is the fast route from owner-occupation to dependence on public housing. If post materialism lowers fertility (admittedly a dubious proposition) it contributes to the ageing problem of the next century, which will generate a certain tightening of belts and may provoke a different kind of value-shift. Certain kinds of 'post-materialist' attitudes, therefore, may not be sustainable in the long run for economic reasons, insofar as the behaviour which they encourage depends on welfare.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN

Few studies control for economic variables when testing attitudes, and integrating the two approaches in other than verbal terms is difficult. The central position of women in all these changes may help reconcile the mechanisms. The economic behaviour and opportunities for women in some societies (so-called 'economic gender equity') may not be compatible with that society's ideas about the importance of family and on differentiated sex roles. The attractions of the labour market, the welfare arrangements for young and elderly dependants, if any, the familial pressure faced by women to produce a child and consider parents may all pull in different directions. Low levels of fertility combined with low levels of childlessness, notably in Southern European countries, arise from an incoherence between unequal levels of gender equity in different social institutions of society. If women have

opportunities similar to men's in education and work, but these are in practice curtailed by children and/or other obligations to the older generation as well through 'familistic' values, then women, as Lesthaeghe points out, will satisfy the obligation to produce a family to the minimal extent, avoiding childlessness but restricting subsequent children severely.¹³

The Japanese and overseas Chinese in Asia¹⁴ may be in similar position in avoiding most of the 'second demographic transition' manifestations of marital breakdown, cohabitation, illegitimacy and so on, to an even more marked degree. They also resemble Southern Europe in having fertility within marriage almost as low and of course an even more marked level of 'familism' and an often multi-generational household structure. In Italy and Spain not only are there

somewhat more three-generation families than in Northern Europe, but adult children are much more likely to be content to remain living with their parents than in Northern Europe, in conditions of considerable personal and economic freedom, rather than moving out to live in separate households or cohabiting.¹⁵ Leete and McDonald both come to similar conclusions about the necessity of major policy changes to support working women if chronic low fertility is to be avoided in those areas.

Note

The full text of Coleman's analysis is D. A. Coleman, 'Reproduction and survival in an unknown world: what drives today's industrial populations and to what future?' NIDI Hofstee Lecture Series, No. 5, Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, The Hague, 1999, ISBN 90-70990-78-4. (NIDI, editorial secretariat, P.O. Box 11650, 2502 AR, The Hague, Lange Houtstraatq, 2511CV, The Hague, The Netherlands. e-mail: info@nidi.nl)

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