

Gordon Sinclair Fellowship Essay

Toward an Anthropological Journalism: The Italian Fertility Case

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Abstract

In the 1960s and 1970s, anthropological theory moved away from structuralism, which looked for the universals among people, to cultural hermeneutics or interpretivism, which focussed on the local and specific. A key theorist, whose work marked the shift away from the “extreme subjectivism” and “extreme formalism” of structuralism, was the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1973: 11). Influenced by Max Weber’s holism and Franz Boas’ American cultural anthropology, Geertz aimed to build “thick descriptions” of particular cultures while his predecessors, such as Claude Levi-Strauss, stripped society down to reveal universal structures. This study will apply these principles to the case of fertility in Italy.

Introduction

In a lecture at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Italian journalist Beppe Severgnini spoke on the “crisis” in contemporary Italy (Severgnini 2008). He broke the problem down into five “I’s”: impotence (the government is powerless and corrupt), innocence (it is impossible to place blame in Italy, “everyone is always innocent”), iconography (such as the spectacular garbage disaster in Naples), indifference (Italians keep a distance from the macro problems in their personal life), and *ingenuità* (or naïveté, a fantasy Italians have of someone coming in and saving them)

(Severgnini 2008). Severgnini warned that if Italy does not clean itself up, it is headed for disaster.

The contemporary Italian disaster is frequently highlighted in media reports. A 2008 *Newsweek* cover with the headline “Italy’s Mess” pictured the garbage overflow in Naples and carried the sub-headline “How a lovely country became Europe’s economic and political disaster zone” (Barigazzi 2008). *The New York Times* declared, “In a Funk, Italy Sings an Aria of Disappointment” (Fisher 2007). One factor often present in the conversation about Italy’s dire political-economic situation is the fact that Italians are having very few babies, that is, the lowest number of children in relation to their population in the world (Livi-Bacci 2001: 1).

The Italian baby bust is part of a general trend toward lower fertility. Since World War Two, there has been a decline in the number of children people are having the world over (Greenhalgh 1995: 3). Birth rates¹ have fallen from 6.0 globally in 1972 to today’s 2.9 (Shorto 2008). While some parts of the planet are over-populated, Europe is undergoing a phase of “lowest low” fertility and Italian cities such as Milan and Bologna have recorded some of the world’s lowest birth rates (Shorto 2008). Today, the global average total fertility rate² is 2.6 yet the total fertility rate in the more developed world³ is 1.6 (Population Reference Bureau 2008: 7). Italy’s total fertility rate of 1.3 is lower still (Population Reference Bureau 2008: 10).

¹ The birth rate is calculated as the number of births per 1,000 people per annum (Population Reference Bureau 2008: 15). Replacement Level Fertility is thought to be 2.1 children per women in the industrial world, or the number of children two people must have to replace themselves. It stands above two to account for the fact that some children will die before becoming adults; anything less than this is non-replacement level fertility (Douglass 2005: 4).

² Total fertility rate (TFR) is the average number of children born to a woman over the course of her life if she survives her childbearing years conforming to the age-specific fertility rates of a given year (Population Reference Bureau 2008: 15). TFR is not a statistic, but an average used to predict population change, calculated by looking at women in their reproductive years during a certain period of time (Population Reference Bureau 2008: 15).

³ Following the UN classification, the more developed regions of the world include all of Europe and North America, as well as Australia, Japan, and New Zealand (Population Reference Bureau 2008: 15).

Most articles on the low birth rate in Italy take an alarmist tone or frame the issue as a tragedy. An article that appeared in *The Telegraph* entitled, “Where have all the bambini gone?” cautioned: “If that rate of reproduction continues, Italians will slowly but surely die out” (Palmer and Johnston 2004). The authors (Palmer and Johnston 2004) also asked, worriedly, “How could Italy - the country which has a reputation for loving children more than any other in the world, and where there is an almost religious reverence for the role of Mama - stop having children?” In an *Economist* survey of Italy, an article aptly titled “Addio, Dolce Vita” lists the low birth rate in the country as part of its “long, slow decline” (2005). Similarly, the 2008 *Newsweek* article connected the low birth rate to “Italy’s mess”, and conjectured that the nation’s record low fertility is caused by the fact that Italians are “famously individualistic” yet so attached to the extended family that it becomes an impediment to branching off and starting a new family (Barigazzi 2008: 22). *The New York Times* focused on societal malaise as the reason for the diminished Italian procreation, a so-called “collective funk” resulting in an “aria of disappointment” (Fisher 2007).

Indeed, the low fertility seems a contradiction: Italy is famous for its strutting sexuality and family values. Perhaps this paradox is the reason Italian fertility rates seem to capture the popular imagination and feature prominently in media discourse. A search on Lexis Nexis for “birth rate” in the English language news of the last two years interrupted because it renders too many results (Nov. 14, 2008). A search for “birth rate” and “Italy” returns over 1,500 results (Nov. 14, 2008).

In contrast to media reports about Italy’s low birth rate, the anthropology on the subject does not frame the situation as a demographic “disaster”. The following will first describe the anthropological theories of Clifford Geertz, Pierre Bourdieu, Susan

Greenhalgh, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, and discuss how these theories can be applied to journalism. Then, ethnography on the low Italian birth rate by anthropologists Elizabeth Krause, Milena Marchesi, Jane Schneider, and Peter Schneider, will provide a contrast to media discourse on the subject. The Italian fertility case will demonstrate how journalists can arrive at more critical, encompassing, culturally sensitive explanations of social phenomena by applying anthropological theory to their reporting.

Chapter One: The Anthropological Theory

1.1 Thick Descriptions and the Cultural Approach

In the 1960s and 1970s, anthropological theory moved away from structuralism, which looked for the universals among people, to cultural hermeneutics or interpretivism, which focussed on the local and specific. A key theorist, whose work marked the shift away from the “extreme subjectivism” and “extreme formalism” of structuralism, was the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1973: 11). Influenced by Max Weber’s holism and Franz Boas’ American cultural anthropology, Geertz aimed to build “thick descriptions” of particular cultures while his predecessors, such as Claude Levi-Strauss, stripped society down to reveal universal structures.

Following Geertz, the cultural anthropologist Nicholas Townsend (1997) points out that fertility decline studies need to look at reproduction as a cultural construction of a biological process rather than a universal given. An anthropological study of fertility, he writes, would not assume that “children are attributed unproblematically to the women who gave birth to them,” but would examine “social reproduction” and how social positions are made and remade over time (Townsend 1997: 96). According to Townsend (1997: 103), “Formal education is a necessary element of parenthood in literate, industrial societies, and must be provided if children are to ‘effectively assume adult roles.’” This type of education is not present in all societies and fosterage and adoption are examples of other types of social parenthood (Townsend 1997: 100, 102). Anthropology has taught us that there are “myriad means people use to transform their biological fertility into their social families” (Greenhalgh 1995:15). Therefore, a universal definition of the content of parenthood is difficult to achieve and localized definitions must be constructed in individual societies.

It is culture that influences how a person's life path should proceed; "when one leaves home; the timing of education; when one achieves economic independence" (Douglass, 2005; 18). Thus, it is culture that informs one's decision about whether to have a child. An anthropological journalism would contextualize reproductive behaviour and take the shaping force of local culture into account. When placed within a cultural milieu, fertility is no longer a universal biological given. As the anthropologist Susan Greenhalgh points out, fertility only "makes sense given the sociocultural and political economic context in which it is embedded" (1995: 17).

For Geertz, achieving this type of context meant immersive participant observation. He argued for an "actor-oriented" approach to others' cultures, urging the anthropologist to get low to the ground, and take the informant's or actor's perspective (Geertz 1973: 15). This method also called for an understanding that this actor is local, as diverse as his contexts, as varied as his symbol systems. Though the deep immersion of anthropology is not always possible against a reporter's pressing deadlines, the anthropological insight -- that one person's view of the world is only one version of reality -- can be carried around with any observer, including the journalist.

1.2 Objectifying the Observer

Journalism could profit from the self-awareness and self-reflexivity trumpeted in the anthropological theory of recent years. Using fertility discourse as an example, the following will show how recognition of the observer's position could prevent ethnocentric bias from leaking into journalistic reports.

Anthropological theorists, such as Clifford Geertz and Pierre Bourdieu, problematized the position of social scientists and questioned the veracity of their

accounts. Geertz stated that anthropologist's are writing fictions, in the sense that they are "something made", *his* or *her* interpretation of the culture (Geertz 1973: 15).

Bourdieu (1997) went further than Geertz, questioning whether the anthropologist could ever adequately immerse himself in a culture. Bourdieu (1997) thought that if the anthropologist (an outsider) has nothing at stake in the culture, he cannot possibly comprehend it. For him, the creation of logical rules or the use of charts and calendars to represent reality would ultimately fail. For example, he wrote of logical rules that they are like "abandoned roads in an old map"; what happens in practice is "the network of pathways which are really maintained and used, the beaten tracks" (Bourdieu 1990: 287). Bourdieu called this the "synoptic illusion", or the illusion that such accounts as calendars, charts or genealogies could represent reality (Bourdieu 1977: 97). He thought that calendars make practice time into linear, homogenous time, flattening reality, making order out of disorder (Bourdieu 1977: 97).

Bourdieu questioned even informants' accounts, which he thought tend to describe some ideal reality rather than what actually transpires. In describing the "objective limits of objectivism", Bourdieu notes that the anthropologist must objectify, or be cognizant of, his "objective" position as the observer (Bourdieu 1977: 18). Social life is not concrete; it is a lived reality, shaped and reshaped over time, and the observer must be aware of this.

Although this level of self-reflexivity could render a journalist impotent, sensitivities about one's observer position and one's own biases could lead to journalism that is less ethnocentric, which will be demonstrated in Chapter Two with respect to media discourse on fertility.

1.3 Statistics in Context

In anthropology, there was a turn away from the dichotomization of structure and event (or structure and agency). This dichotomy, inherited by the structuralist tradition, was largely based on De Saussure's linguistics, which pitted *langue* (structure) and *parole* (event) against each other (Culler 1976: 31). Marshall Sahlins's intellectual goal was to reconcile this dichotomy, and see the two in dialectical interplay, rather than as opposed forces (Sahlins 2000). Similarly, Bourdieu (1990) wished to reinvigorate the dialectic between structure and agency. He, too, criticizes De Saussure for prioritizing *langue* (structure), and seeing *parole* (event or speech) as the expression of the structure's logical relations (Bourdieu 1990: 32). This move in theory marked the incorporation of politics into studies of culture. It implied that people are not rational actors working within inherited structures, but active agents and individual maximizers who consider honour, prestige, and the pursuit of symbolic capital in their decisions (Bourdieu 1990: 16). It also acknowledged that change occurs "within the powerful constraints imposed by the political and economic structures of their societies" (Greenhalgh 1995: 21).

Writing in this tradition, the anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues in an essay entitled "Demography without Numbers" for a "critically interpretive" approach to demographic study, such as the study of birth rates, and begins with negative questions, such as "What is being hidden from view in official statistics? Whose economic or political interests are reflected in the kinds of records kept? How are records kept?" (Scheper-Hughes 1997: 220). Until recently, she writes, "public policies were argued and decisions were reached by relying on historical, ethical, and philosophical arguments, while facts and figures, statistics, and other quantitative measures were used, if at all, as supporting evidence" (Scheper-Hughes 1997: 219). Now, Scheper-Hughes argues, people

rely heavily on numbers and statistics to confirm our arguments, which is true also for journalism.

Greenhalgh (1995: 13) argues that fertility studies often ignore politics and history, and are based on quantitative data, while “a political economy of fertility is a multi-levelled field of inquiry that is explicitly historical and attentive to political and economic as well as social and cultural forces.” The objective of this type of study is “to understand how a particular set of reproductive institutions relate to each other” (Greenhalgh 1995: 13).

The application of these insights to journalism would lead to questions about what drives the statistics that go into stories, and which interest groups may be working behind the scenes. For example, the politics of birth rates is especially evident in Italy: “In the 1930s, the Consiglio superiore di statistica, directed by the distinguished demographer Corrado Gini, used a battery of simple measures like the ratio of births to marriages to establish the identity of subfertile groups within the population and to legitimize Mussolini’s pronatalist legislation” (Kreager 1997: 160). In his book *Social Bodies* (1994), the anthropologist David Horn discusses the use of the Italian body to achieve the state’s ends, often via strategic use of statistics. Horn (1994: 46) notes that in order to determine whether the Italian population was thriving or suffering, Mussolini looked to statistics as a measure. According to *Il Duce*, statistics painted a dreary picture of Italy in 1927: “the most important problem facing Italy was not, strictly speaking, a medical one but a demographic one” (Horn 1994: 47). The population was too small for his Machiavellian ambitions: “If a large and growing population was the key to international and imperial success, a declining birth rate was a symptom of disease and decline” (Horn 1994: 47). Mussolini started a demographic campaign, which focused, among other

things, on encouraging fertility (Horn 1994: 48). As we will see in the ethnography section of this paper, today's natalist policies in Italy echo Mussolini's fascist ambitions and seem to be equally unsuccessful.

Population studies are historically related to the notion of imagined communities and populations as bounded, political entities (Kreager 1997: 155). Anthropological theory, such as Scheper-Hughes', can reveal how statistics such as birth rates can be politically charged. Journalism that incorporates this insight may offer more accurate and encompassing accounts of the fertility narrative and other social trends.

1.4 Fitting Gender into the Equation

Anthropological theory on gender can also be applied to journalism. Anthropologists consider it false to assume that sex and kinship are elaborations of biology. Yanagisako and Collier (1987) argued that what makes people related is not only biology, and that gender is not just an elaboration of biological sex. Greenhalgh (1995: 24) reminds us that "gender is a pervasive force that structures all aspects of life. Reproductive life is no exception." Therefore, gender theory should be factored into any study of fertility. China's attempt to control of reproduction shows that "Gender connotes agency": even where women's fertility is controlled by the State's "one-child policy" people still manage to exert their agency by circumventing the policy and having more children based on their reproductive needs and desires (Greenhalgh 1995: 25). Women are "social actors who use the resources at their disposal to devise strategies that challenge—and sometimes alter—the systems that oppress them" (Greenhalgh 1995: 25). A feminist look at fertility decline would see gender as structuring and demonstrate its role in fertility choices, thus depicting women as active participants instead of passive non-agents.

Fertility decline is often automatically seen as synonymous with the improvement of the status of women: “the notion that women’s lives have gotten, or will eventually get better has persisted in the field (of demography) despite twenty-five years of research in the field of women and development showing at best mixed gains and contradictory changes” (Greenhalgh 1995: 25). However, gender theory is not optimistic about the advancement of women’s status. Ethnographic examples do not support the Western assumption that having fewer children has freed or liberated women and an analysis of fertility that encompasses the study of gender would be sensitive to this (Greenhalgh 1995: 14).

The application of gender theory to journalism could illuminate the inequalities between men and women that are sometimes taken for granted. For example, instead of media reports on fertility that assume fewer children is equated with the liberation of women, we could work toward more complex answers that include men, such as Elizabeth Krause’s theories on fertility decline in Prato, Tuscany. She writes, “I suggest that unravelling the story of fertility decline stands to gain from considering how the dominant key of masculinity has been refigured” (Krause 2005b: 610). Her gendered approach to fertility looks at men in addition to women, and reveals that it is men’s “destabilized masculinity” caused by the stigma attached to one’s past as a peasant that emasculated Italian men and contributed to the fertility decline in Italy (Krause 2005b: 61). Though a journalist’s report would not be as philosophical or theoretical as Krause’s, the application of these framings may lead to more holistic pictures of society.

Chapter Two: Anthropologists weigh in on Italy's Baby Bust

Fertility decline in Italy presents an interesting and dramatic case. The decline started in the nineteenth century when the northern and central regions of the country recorded a 25 per cent drop in marital fertility (Krause 2005a: 161). Families diminished in size from about a dozen children, to about two in the 1960s, to the world's lowest fertility rate of 1.3 in 1990 (Krause 2005a: 161). Italy's total fertility rate is again 1.3 (Population Reference Bureau 2008: 10). The following are anthropologists' explanations for why fertility levels in Italy continue to be among the lowest in the world. The first, by Elizabeth Krause, takes the cultural approach, and the second by Peter and Jane Schneider offers a political-economy perspective. These examples illustrate the self-reflexivity and cultural sensitivities inherent in anthropology. Such aforementioned factors as gender, political relations, and ethnocentric biases are taken into account and lead to nuanced understandings of this social trend, which contrast the alarmist media reports on fertility decline.

2.1 Tuscany: The Cultural Perspective

American anthropologist Elizabeth Krause, who did her fieldwork in Prato, Tuscany, looks at how culture affects fertility in Italy. In her analysis, she considers gender construction, politics, and ethnocentric bias in the study of fertility decline. This enables her to critique what she considers to be the "alarmist framings", which "depict populations as imploding" that feature so prominently in news reports on this subject (Krause 2005a: 159). Krause (2005a) sets out to challenge these depictions, especially those that portray low fertility "as an illness" or social pathology caused by women who prioritize work and their own lives ahead of making babies:

The alarmist language relies on imaginings of a historical woman who was a non-working, non-participant in local and global economies. This is a myth born of the liberal nineteenth century, ripened during the fascist era, and harvested in the postwar period: the myth that women didn't work 'before' seems to have really taken hold among what Italians call the popular classes in the 1960s. This myth about how women 'used to be' speaks loudly about what women's practices and performances should look like: dedicated only to being self-sacrificing mothers (Krause 2005a: 176).

Explanations such as this endure despite the fact that Italian women of the last 200 years played a part in industry, and this did not historically affect birth rates (Krause 2005a: 176). This popular explanation pits children in opposition to work, and makes it seem that the cause of low birth rates is the difficulty for women to balance work and family. Instead, the following will explore how the "so-called culture of responsibility [that] dictates a specific and intense set of expectations for Italian mothers" contributes to the low fertility rate in Italy (Krause 2005a: 163).

2.1a: The Burden of Culture

Krause (2005a) posits that the impossibly high expectations that come with mothering in Italy may keep Italians from having more children. In examining motherhood as a cultural construct, the weight and repercussions of these standards are brought to light.

In the ethnography, Krause (2005a) uses an Italian song, "Toys and Perfumes," to illustrate the pressures mothers in Prato face. The song moralizes motherhood, and puts women in the "subordinate, self-sacrificing roles of mother and caretaker" (Krause 2005a: 167). This "prefigures the current culture of responsibility that surrounds Italian motherhood," a trope which "erases the history of women as workers and idealizes them as mothers" (Krause 2005a: 167). The ideal Italian mother stays within the domestic sphere, cleaning, clothing and feeding her children and husband. In Prato, raising children requires an astronomical amount of energy (Krause 2005a: 168).

These pressures arrived in Italy with modernity and the advent of the privatized modern family around the 1600s, and only trickled down to the majority of Italians by the 20th century (Krause 2005a: 173). New norms regarding children that emerged with the modern family emphasized “bodily comportment, moral and intellectual education, medical practices, hygiene and dietary norms” and the pressure was placed on mothers to uphold these standards (Krause 2005a: 173):

As I participated in daily life, I was continuously struck by the cleanliness of the houses, the neatness of the children, the precision of their clothes: the delicate collars trimmed with lace...the standards of presentation with regard to my 4-and-a-half year old daughter were far below those of my Italian consultants... I became increasingly self-conscious about my own parental habits of dressing and fussing over my daughter (Krause 2005a: 168).

Furthermore, these standards, set by an elite class and seen as part of a “civilizing process”, are difficult for average women to imitate (Krause 2005a: 174). The Italian mother is also responsible for distancing her family from their peasant past by meeting the aforementioned elite benchmark with respect to bodily comportment, cleanliness, feeding, and clothing (Krause 2005a: 168). This pressure on mothers, Krause posits, may be a reason Italians are reproducing less frequently.

Alarmist rhetoric about populations disguises these cultural pressures in Italy’s patriarchal society. Instead they depict Italian women “as irrational family-makers”:

This is a not-so story; rather, these women are busy conforming to other normalizing gender role demands and adjusting to fissures related to their uneasy locations in shifting class structures as they figure out how they must, by ‘necessity,’ manipulate the symbols of a new-moneyed world to their and their children’s advantages (Krause 2005a: 176-7).

Krause also argues that the cultural standards of motherhood make an impression on would-be moms: young Italian women expressed concern about whether they possessed the “right character” for mothering (Krause 2005a: 175). They see their mother’s

obsession with cleanliness as a pathology, but still worry about not being able to live up to their mother's standards. In Prato, Krause posits, the unbearable heaviness of expectation that Italian mothers face prevents them from having babies.

2.1b: Ethnocentrism in Alarmist Discourses on Fertility Decline

Krause reveals the ethnocentric implications in depicting falling birth rates as a serious social ill. Rather than perpetuating the sorts of alarmist folk theories about low birth rates that are spread in the media, Krause takes a step back and problematizes this discourse of low fertility as “a national pathology” (Krause 2005a: 160). These discourses “pave the way for a fortress Europe in which xenophobia and racism become the order of the day, in which aspirations of middle-class status seem inevitable, and in which rigid gender roles appear natural” (Krause 2005a: 159). The rest of world worries about too much population, while Europe worries about too little population. For Krause, this is an ethnocentric concern for only certain types of population. Furthermore, fatalistic depictions of European population decline and the forecasts of a barren future, “ooze with assumptions about what a normal, healthy society looks like, one based on a same-sex nuclear family with ‘rational’ parents who, if all were well, would procreate two children” (Krause 2005a: 160).

2.1c: Gender Roles in Italy

A feminist approach to Italian fertility also illustrates the problems with depicting the decline as a pathology, the fault of women (Krause 2005a: 160). Men are often left out of these explanations, and Krause's (2005b) aforementioned gender-sensitive study of fertility revealed how changing conceptions of masculinity factored into the falling fertility rate. Again, an examination of the kinds of cultural pressures women face reveal

that it is not women's selfishness or want of material objects that keeps them from having kids, but rather the high standards of childcare daunt would-be moms.

Recent sociological studies by Kohler, Billari and Ortega (2006) show that despite the association between women's participation in the workforce and the drop in the number of babies they have, working mothers are having more babies than stay-at-home moms. Thus, as Krause was keen *not* to do—perpetuate folk theories on how work keeps women from reproducing—these sociological findings corroborate her claim that the female gender role may prevent people from having kids.

2.1d: The Political Implications of Fertility Decline

Krause, with anthropologist Milena Marchesi, sees fertility politics as a form of “social Viagra” used to encourage reproduction to pump life into the nation and reproduce the normative Italian family, which the Catholic religion and government idealize (2007). In their Italian fieldwork, they show that the current discourse about the demographic problem in Italy and the dangerously low fertility, along with a 2003 baby-bonus and 2004 legislation that restricts access to reproductive technology from homosexual couples and single would-be mothers, is reminiscent of Mussolini's pronatalist campaigns (Krause and Marchesi 2007: 350). They point out that this contradictory legislation reveals the emphasis on “the importance of replenishing Italy with Italian babies rather than immigrant Others. Similarly, the law restricting access to procreative technologies aimed to reproduce only certain kinds of families. Politicians appealed to family norms and played on popular and Catholic fears regarding technological intervention” (Krause and Marchesi 2007: 351). Fertility is a vehicle for cultural preservation. It is not anymore just about strength in numbers, as Mussolini's demographic campaign strove for, but about populating Italy with right kind of people and keeping out ‘others’ who may

threaten Italian cultural norms. In other words, “These policies reveal a project of national rejuvenation that delimits desirable and nondesirable populations” (Krause and Marchesi 2007: 351).

Despite the EU mandate for social cohesion in 2000, which emphasized immigration instead of fertility to solve the low population problem, “the comparable Italian document tipped the balance so far toward the fertility field that any potential for an immigrant solution all but disappeared” (Krause and Marchesi 2007: 355). Again, the pronatalism of yesteryear re-emerged. There was a preference for encouraging fertility among Italians, rather than drawing in people from other countries. This is illustrated by the 2004 law on new reproductive technology (Krause and Marchesi 2007: 356). There is an attempt “at reproducing the normative Italian family in the name of social cohesion” (Krause and Marchesi 2007: 356). Though social cohesion is seen as the way to bring Italy into the future, “according to the [Italian] government, [it] can only be sustained through reproduction within the heterosexual family... organized around traditional gender roles and a cohesiveness borne of homogeneity” (Krause Marchesi 2007; 358).

2.2 Sicily: The Political-Economy Perspective

Anthropologists Jane Schneider and Peter Schneider take a historical and political economy approach to the study of fertility decline in Villamaura, a pseudonym for a rural town in Sicily. Sicily was one of the last places to experience a drop in fertility in Western Europe (Schneider and Schneider 1996). Schneider and Schneider look at how this province in southern Italy fits into Europe’s overall transition to low fertility.

2.2a: The Power Relations of Reproduction

Schneider and Schneider adopt the view that power relations constrain people’s ability to make rational decisions. They show that the *braccianti* were impoverished, malnourished,

and often sickly (Schneider and Schneider 1995: 198). They were at the disposal of the rich, forced to forsake their own lives and families to please the elites: “The result was the interdependent reproduction of two classes” (Schneider and Schneider 1995: 200). A man’s family was not his own; he was left dependent on the ruling class of the town, and thus lost his agency. This “situational powerlessness” (rather than cultural determinism or economic cost-benefit analysis of children of earlier demographic theory) is what “made members of [the *braccianti*] class slower than the others to respond to imbalances that emerged between people and resources once mortality rates began to decline” (Schneider and Schneider 1995: 200). The lesser status and general impoverishment left them without the tools to imagine how to limit family size. Schneider and Schneider expand on this idea in a full-length ethnography, *Festival of the Poor* (1996). Again, the focus is how class ideologies influence fertility as demonstrated by the drop in fertility rates at different times by different classes in Villamaura (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 11). Seen in this way, class influences fertility practices and this anthropological study is able to draw out how each class responds differently to limiting family size and how one’s class can be a constraining factor in the ability to rationalize the number of children to have.

Furthermore, Schneider and Schneider examine how notions about respectability due to the widespread “reproductive stigma” associated with having too many children are also divided across classes (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 114). According to the demographic anthropologist Philip Kreager, “groups define themselves as observing a certain morality regarding the facts of life; sexual behaviour, gender relations, marriage practices, family formation, and the treatment of bodily substances are key to differentiating ‘us’ from ‘them’” (cited in Schneider and Schneider 1996: 12). A cultural

system “is a moral system grounded in the management of vital processes: marriages, births, deaths and migrations” (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 13). Schneider and Schneider suggest that a culture can be interpreted by studying how people manage these processes, and how they group themselves according to their common management (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 13). In their ethnography, they focus on how Sicilians manage births. They find there is a reproductive stigma associated with the poor, which attaches negativity and tradition to too many children, and “social ills such as backwardness, underdevelopment, overpopulation, and poverty to reproductive practices that elude consciousness or ‘rational control’” (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 13). In Villamaura, people believed that the poor had more children; the reason, said townsfolk, was because “sexual embrace is the festival of the poor” (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 11). Control of fertility was seen as a rational choice, and implied that poor people who have more babies were irrational: “Instances where the peasant and working classes continued to exhibit high fertility, even as their large families seemed to make them more impoverished, raised the spectre of *irrational* demographic behaviour” (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 7). It was thought that the poor could not possibly follow the rules of sexual modesty, living like “animals” in small quarters, the opposite sexes forced to share space (Schneider, 1995; 198). Malthusian notions of “moral restraint” implied that people who lack resources should not have children (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 151). If “moral restraint” was the goal, it was thought that the poor with their numerous children lacked self-control and respectability.

The reproductive stigma in Europe is for Schneider and Schneider (1996: 146) what led people to focus on controlling their sexuality and their bodies in the first place; the preferred method that demonstrated such control was coitus interruptus. The common

occurrence of coitus interruptus in the Christian parts of Europe implies a correlation between religion and this method of birth control (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 152). But it is not solely religion that influenced birth control and the fertility decline. Rather, it is, again, “respectability” (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 164). They note a number of pre-technological avenues for limiting family size (spacing births, abortion, celibacy in marriage, etc). Because the coitus method demonstrated the control over the body associated with the upper classes who had less children, it became the birth control of choice and eventually contributed to the fertility decline in Europe (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 12).

“Reputational networks” that dictate family norms are the social forces that spread the coitus interruptus method and led to the decline in birth rates (Schneider and Schneider 1996; 9). Schneider and Schneider note that as more privileged families began to have less children, and as the gulf separated those smaller, wealthier families from their less fortunate counter-parts, “it became axiomatic to award respectability to families with four or fewer children, while disparaging the parents (or the mothers) or large birth cohorts, especially when they were poor (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 9). Thus, fertility practices such as the coitus interruptus method and reproductive stigma are mediated by class and dictated notions of respectability. This political-economy approach to fertility decline illuminates the class struggles within the decision to have a child.

2.2b: Eurocentrism and the Reproductive Stigma

The political-economy perspective favoured by Schneider and Schneider in their examination of fertility rates in Sicily illustrates that what Coale (1986) calls “the calculus of conscious choice” pits the rational against the irrational and aids in the perpetuation of the reproductive stigma (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 179). Though

this project emphasized the importance of culture, “their celebrations of a European marriage pattern-cum-family values resemble [social Darwinists] in some ways... they share in a dichotomizing discourse. Oppositional terms include nature versus control over nature, body versus mind, the dominance of biology versus the delay of instinctual gratification” (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 190).

The reproductive stigma associated with the lower classes of Sicily speaks to a wider trend that does not stay within the confines of Sicily:

Even today, Europeans are quick to attribute an overly precocious instinct-driven, or dangerously uncontrolled sexuality to the men, or women, or men and women, of immigrant groups in their midst. Moslem immigrants, in particular, are defined in the popular press as troublesome overbreeders, even in the face of mounting evidence that their fertility has fallen substantially in recent years (Schneider and Schneider 1996: 11).

Furthermore, in 1994, the UN Population Conference in Cairo reported stories that went against the notion that Muslims reject birth control: “Some two-thirds of Iranian women were using contraception distributed free by the state... The birth control pill was available over the counter in Saudi Arabia” (Connelly 2008: 367). But despite these findings, the reproductive stigma is alive and well in Sicily and beyond.

Conclusion

The anthropologists’ cultural and political economy approaches to the Italian fertility decline shed light on why the birth rate in Italy is low, and offer a contrast to media reports on the same subject. Though anthropology is an academic discipline too often confined to the university, and journalism is being played out to tight deadlines everyday, anthropological insights and theory can inform the way journalists see the world, and provide an example of the holistic explanations journalists should strive for.

The New York Times suggested that, for many, the low fertility rate in Europe right now “is hard evidence of an imminent disaster of unprecedented proportions” (Shorto 2008). This kind of discourse is common in popular media reports on fertility decline. But as one anthropologist points out, “The situation of European countries with extremely low birth rates will cause changes in the demographic landscape but it certainly does not evoke barrenness” (Douglass 2005: 3). Most people still want at least one child (Douglass 2005: 3). Anthropology sheds light on the demographic “disaster” by showing how it isn’t necessarily a disaster when brought into context: it is not that there are too few people, but too few of certain kinds of people.

Despite low fertility rates, Europe is not opening its doors to immigrants and immigration policies are actually tightening (Douglass 2005: 7). As the economy continues to shrink, Europe will likely strengthen this closed-door policy. Unlike North America, “no European nation defines itself as an immigrant society. Residing in the same place throughout one’s life is considered normal” (Douglass 2005: 7). The Italian case exemplifies this xenophobic attitude. The 2003 and 2004 fertility-related laws (Krause and Marchesi 2007) illustrate that for the Italians, population decline is a concern (stemming from the Machiavellian belief in strength in numbers of the Fascist era) yet Italians prefer to hold out for the Italian population that the Church and government imagine.

Though controlling populations is a modern phenomenon, population policy occurs across cultures and most policy is pronatalist, encouraging people “be fruitful and multiply” (Connelly 2008: 7). In Italy, this tendency can be traced back to Mussolini’s 1927 Ascension Day speech, when he proclaimed that the Italian population was diseased “launching a ‘demographic battle’ to increase population by 50 percent before 1950”

(Connelly 2008: 67). Among Mussolini's imperatives were cutting emigration and paying for pregnant women to return to Italy to give birth (Connelly 2008: 68). Krause and Marchesi (2007) point out that this pronatalism has been recently revived in Italy, where cultural preservation seems to be a paramount concern. There is an unwillingness to open up to different styles of family or alter the definition of who is Italian. In order to control the health of the national social body and preserve the culture, the bodies of individuals—their reproduction—must be controlled as well (Horn 1994: 49). As with Mussolini, statistics and demographic studies can be the means by which governments achieve this control.

Anthropological theory contextualizes fertility decline, especially in terms of politics, culture, gender, and power relations. As Krause was able to demonstrate, the inflated burden on mothers (2005a) and deflated masculinity (2005b) in Italy may be preventing people from having children. Krause and Marchesi (2007) discuss the use of pronatalist policy and low fertility in Italy to perpetuate norms regarding the traditional family. Schneider and Schneider (1996) illustrate how class relations and ideologies influence who has what number of children.

Allan Hill compares the views of an economist and an anthropologist regarding the study of smaller societies. The economist wrote that scientific analysis is impossible without measurement, theoretical framework, and carefully designed scientific experiment (Srinivasan 1989 cited in Hill 1997: 241). This empirically-focused view diverges from that of anthropologist Edmund Leach:

Social anthropology is not, and should not aim to be, a 'science' in the natural sense... Social anthropologists should not see themselves as seekers after objective truth; their purpose is to gain insight into other people's behaviour, or for that matter, their own. 'Insight' may seem a very vague concept but it is one we admire in other contexts, it is the quality of deep

understanding which, as critics, we attribute to those whom we regard as *great* artists, dramatists, novelists, composers (Leach 1982 cited in Hill 1997: 241-242; emphasis in original).

Similarly, the journalist's purpose is also to gain insight into other people's behaviour and deep understanding of the world around them. In both reporting and ethnographic fieldwork, the journalist and the anthropologist aim to share their observations of and insights into human society. But where anthropology is sensitive to the variation in humanity, and that one person's view of the world is only one version of reality, journalism often falls short. At its best, journalism would espouse the methods and academic rigor of anthropology. The Italian case on fertility decline illustrates how anthropological theory can be applied to journalism: instead of exporting Western assumptions to places for study, anthropological theory encourages self-reflexivity, cultural sensitivity, and a holistic approach too often absent in media reportage.

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