

“REPRODUCTION OF THE SPECIES IS NOT EASILY COMPATIBLE WITH INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY” (KINGSLEY DAVIS, 1937): NEW ZEALAND (NZ), A CASE-STUDY ENGLISH-SPEAKING COUNTRY (ESC)

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Setting the Issue¹

For most Western Developed Countries (WDCs), low fertility is an issue of major importance. Debates on the subject have erupted in a series of waves on a number of themes critical to the mapping (levels and differentials) and the understanding (causes) of reproductive dynamics in WDCs. Although some rudiments of what might constitute policy recommendations are implicit in this work, few if any academic papers have ventured strategies to return to higher fertility. Most, however, implicitly see prolonged low fertility, presumably levels below a TFR of about 2.0, as detrimental.

A first theme is best summarised by one of its leading proponents, Dirk van de Kaa who does this succinctly: “The ‘*revolution demographique*’ based on what Adolphe Landry (1934) called the ‘*rationalisation de la vie*’ has been succeeded by what one might well call the ‘*individualisation de la vie*’” (2004: 80). While this, the so-called “second demographic transition”, may seem to focus on micro-level (couple) behaviours, Ron Lesthaeghe in particular has also looked at the generational changes in norms, the macro-level context, accompanying shifts in reproduction (eg Lesthaeghe and Moors 1995).

A second theme, perhaps the most widely researched, emerging in the 1990s and dominating the FFS Flagship Conference (Brussels 2000), moved beyond couple behaviours to look at contextual factors, notably props coming from policy and family networks, housing and employment (and thus income) and what has come to be called the work-life balance, and “normative pressures” (Hobcraft 2004). Inherent in this approach also is detailed cross-national comparison, particularly between Mediterranean and Northern Europe. John Hobcraft, in summarising his work with Katherine Kiernan, encapsulates this theme: they “argued that what matters is the reality of practical support to ease parenthood in Northwestern Europe, rather than the rhetoric of pro-natalism in Southern Europe... [the] enabling [of] the combination of motherhood and work, although leading to foregone leisure, was much more acceptable than the starker choice between work and motherhood...” (2004: 82). Anne Gauthier’s important studies (eg 2002) have formalised, in particular, the nature and effects of policy.

A third theme in the debate has been associated with a “broadly conceived” paper, as van de Kaa (2004) referred to it, by John Caldwell and Thomas Schindlmayr (2003). It elicited controversy and critiques in papers by van de Kaa and others (*Population Studies*, 2004). Caldwell and Schindlmayr covered a wide range of issues, such as women working and couple dynamics, looking for commonalities. They concluded by citing a very early (1937) comment by Kingsley Davis “that ultimately the reproduction of the species is not easily compatible with advanced industrial society” (2003: 257). It was this notion of some overarching explanation that probably aroused the most severe critiques of their paper. But was the rush to judgement a little too hasty?

Our paper will use Davis’ idea as an organising principle. As a case-study it takes New Zealand as an example of the English-speaking countries (ESCs); in fact, NZ is a part of the subset of ESCs that Caldwell and Schindlmayr call “offshoots” – we prefer “Neo-Europes”.

¹ This paper draws on a more detailed analysis in a book, Pool, Dharmalingam and Sceats (in press) *The New Zealand Family, 1840-2005: A Demographic History*; and Pool and Sceats (2003) “Low Fertility of the English Speaking Countries”, *Proceedings National Inst. for Pop. and Social Security, International Workshop/Seminar on Low Fertility and Family Policies, Tokyo, Nov 2002*, published on the web: <http://www.ipss.go.jp/English/WebJournal.files/Population?Web.Population.htm>

Demographically, NZ is closest to the US, which, in turn, comprises the overwhelming majority of the populations in developed ESCs. Like the US, NZ has had near replacement fertility since the late 1970s, at times just touching the magical 2.1.

Davis' Argument

The reaction to Caldwell and Schindlmayr's citing of Davis was too simplistic because commentators chose to see it as referring to some singular factor. Indeed, in some responses it is asserted that, by appealing to Davis' concern over "advanced industrial society", Caldwell and Schindlmayr were led to make "a misguided attempt to force an overarching explanation onto diverse situations..." (Hobcraft 2004: 82). We have chosen instead to view Davis' comment as far more diffused, as relating to a whole raft of factors at both the macro- and micro-levels, both behaviours, and norms and values, including reflexivity (van de Kaa 2004), that together constitute the life-ways of advanced industrial society. Modernisation may be an overarching stage of social transformation, thereby constituting a generalised and often latent structure, but it is one that comprises many different "situations" and factors.

Latent structures may be very important. Statisticians have a sort of in-house maxim that an apparent correlation between the decline in the stork population in Denmark and the decreasing birthrate in Britain is spurious. But Sir Maurice Kendall used to question this by saying that perhaps there were latent structural factors operating (in-house seminars on statistical methods, WFS, 1976): the growth in multi-story apartment-dwellings saw the demise of chimneys and thus Danish stork nesting spots, and also may have produced contexts that were less favourable for the young of Britain to go forth and multiply.

Davis' original paper was written near the end of the 1930s depression during which, as several of the Caldwell and Schindlmayr critics note, fertility in many WDCs went below replacement, prior to the development of modern contraception. Moreover, the point is also raised that the subsequent Baby Boom and its high fertility weakens the Davis argument (see especially van de Kaa 2004 and Hobcraft 2004). Instead we argue that the Baby Boom was an aberrant period, a temporary deviation from a long term trend that had first become evident in Europe sub-nationally in the 1920s, but nationally in various WDCs in the 1930s. It also will ask whether the Baby Boom, properly speaking, was really only a phenomenon of the Neo-Europe ESCs and possibly Japan. Is it a much exaggerated trend in reproduction in the other WDCs, including the United Kingdom?

In a paper published co-terminously with those on the Second Demographic Transition, and referring to the period since the Baby Boom, Davis himself had raised yet another spectre "Never before in recorded history...has fertility been so low for whole societies as it is now in the developed world" (1986: 48). The situation to which he then referred has continued on almost for another 20 years beyond when he wrote, and now in country after country has been perpetuated for periods in excess of the duration of the Baby Boom. Thus, has Davis bequeathed us a rather deterministic and grim spectre?

New Zealand

We use NZ, a high fertility WDC, as a case-study. It has sat alongside the US in recently maintaining high fertility levels, with a Baby Blip touching replacement around 1990. It is also a good example because it had sub-replacement fertility in the depression. Moreover, it had a massive Baby Boom in terms of duration (1943-73), levels and intensity (very early timing; very short birth intervals). TFRs for the European-origin Pakeha population, the focus of our paper, exceeded 4.0; in terms of birth cohort numbers there were two peaks, 1960 and 1970. A detailed examination shows that it is only the Neo-European ESCs that had this combination of high TFRs, and timing and spacing of the sort seen in NZ; this raises the question whether any European WDC, including the Netherlands, went through a real "Baby Boom" (Pool and Scats 2003).

This allows us to address a closely related question: why ESCs generally have higher fertility than most other WDCs? This is particularly puzzling as the ESCs have done more in the years dominated by neo-liberal economic ideologies to demolish their welfare state apparatuses than have the countries of Northern Europe or France. New Zealand, with the earliest welfare state going back to the 1890s, has gone further than others.

Two simplistic explanations are posited for high fertility in ESCs, especially NZ and the US: the presence of minorities with higher fertility, and flexible labour market policies. Thirty percent of NZ'ers are non-Pakeha; the 7% who are Asian have very low fertility; Pacific Islanders (7%) and Maori (15 %) have rates above replacement. But the net effect on the TFR is very limited (Pool and Sceats: 2003; see Frejka, 2004 on the US).

A detailed analysis of flexible labour market effects (Pool and Sceats 2003), mainly drawing on experiences from outside NZ because there are few data on it (a major exception are the surveys being completed by Janet Sceats), can be encapsulated in a few phrases: 1. The term itself is inexact, typically implying casualisation and a shift to part-time work. 2. Flexibility mainly privileges employers as it allows them to minimise the effects of labour supply on demand. 3 It may meet the needs of workers where casual and/or part-time work may be the only feasible form for some working poor, especially sole-parents, or where both parents have to work and need to share child-minding and other domestic chores – this, of course, begs the question why both partners must work. 4. There is an assumption that there are jobs to be had, a problem sloughed off elegantly in much of labour economics where supply is seen to equal demand. 5. It is associated with growing polarisation within the workforce: stable, full-time work is increasingly the domain of the better-off, and this social segmentation is reinforced by childbearing, in which case the presence or absence of other props, including safe childcare, family networks, a supportive partner and a supportive employer, become critical issues.

In NZ this becomes tangled up with other factors. Prolonged and costly education, with attendant debts, and the need in a managerialist era to fight up a career ladder, typically by working very long hours, so as to amortise that investment, both financially and socio-emotionally, are anathema to part-time or casual work, and ultimately to childbearing.

The NZ Baby Boom was marked by exceptionally precocious childbearing. But today there only vestiges of this: the ESCs in general, and NZ above all, have higher proportions of their births at younger ages (<25) than do the WDCs as a whole. But equally well the factors discussed in the last paragraph have led to delayed childbearing, so that ESCs, especially NZ, have higher percentages of their births at older ages than do the WDCs. Within NZ there is marked reproductive polarisation, determined, above all, by part-time or full-time work status, but most marked among the most skilled workers.

Why, then, is fertility high relative to other WDCs? Why do couples still feel that NZ is a great place to have children? This goes back to latent structures, to NZ's processes of economic modernisation. Like all ESCs it was early, and in NZ's case high per capita income levels in the 19th century were reinforced by the early welfare state. This, *inter alia*, reformed land tenure, redistributing economically viable lots as family farms that drew on advanced technologies. Despite being heavily dependent on the export of primary sector commodities, NZ rapidly urbanised. This took the form of suburbanisation in owner-occupied houses on individual lots. This pattern reached its peak in the Baby Boom, coinciding with the zenith of the welfare state. In that era, so it will be argued, the inexorable march to low fertility was stalled as an advanced industrial society provided the conditions, briefly, in which were recreated aspects of traditional domestic life favourable to reproduction. Since then, not only has neo-liberal ideology triumphed in eliminating much of the welfare state, but access to family home ownership by first-time buyers is rapidly becoming a dream rather than the reality it was in the Baby Boom.

But the Baby Boom conditions favourable to family-formation still remain on in popular nostalgia, and as a result couples still aspire to have families. To a degree they are successful, even though it means increasingly concentrating childbearing into ages 30+ -- 50% of babies are born to women at these ages. Whether nostalgia will be sufficient to sustain higher fertility is a key question. With the ageing of the population at fertile ages, there will be fewer parents even at what are the prime reproductive ages today, at 30-34 yrs. Thus numbers of NZ births could drop in spite of rates being maintained; sustainability would therefore be threatened.

Conclusion

As the NZ case-study shows, sustainability might become problematic even when a country is in the WDC high fertility group. And high fertility itself might really be a function of a nostalgic attempt to recapture the past. Finally, in the demography of low fertility we tend to focus on rates, yet the case of NZ shows that birth cohort sizes are ultimately the more critical factor for population sustainability, and the numbers produced will be affected by age and other compositional factors even if rates remain stationary.

A corollary to the NZ example is the more generic question: do conditions for sustainability vary? Is the overarching condition of, or the latent structures associated with, "advanced industrial society" unvarying and, as Davis inferred, almost inexorable? Or instead, do the particular mixes of factors, of situations, implicated in the overarching condition and its latent structures vary from population to population?

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