

*Fertility, class and gender  
in Britain, 1860–1940*

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## Introduction

The period 1860–1940 witnessed a dramatic fall in fertility in British society. There was a marked decline in the number of live births experienced by each married woman in the population from an average of nearly six to an average of just over two.<sup>1</sup> *Fertility, class and gender in Britain, 1860–1940* is intended as a contribution to the collective effort of trying to explain and to understand how and why this happened.

By the early twentieth century there was widespread international recognition by officials and social scientists that this phenomenon had occurred in many of the economically advanced countries of the world. In fact it is now clear that both within Austro-Hungary and France there had been a substantial reduction in the birth rate in certain rural quarters from the late eighteenth century, while some aristocratic and urban bourgeois groups display reduced marital fertility in the previous century.<sup>2</sup> Despite the somewhat rudimentary facilities for demographic observation possessed by most nineteenth-century states, awareness of these developments had prompted a certain amount of speculative discussion. This was particularly so in France after the disaster of the Franco-Prussian War, where the menace of her demographically more vigorous neighbour, the newly unified German Empire of *Blut und Eisen*, gave particular impetus to such concerns.<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of the nineteenth century the pioneering anthropological and sociological work of the peculiar obsessive, Arsène Dumont, represented the most thorough attempt, in the continuing absence of appropriately constructed official statistics, to study and explain fertility restraint in French society.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on Population*, ch. 23, para. 617.

<sup>2</sup> For a helpful, accessible summary of this range of evidence, see Livi-Bacci, 'Social group forerunners of fertility control in Europe'.

<sup>3</sup> Zeldin, *France 1848–1945. Vol. II*, ch.19; Spengler, 'French population theory since 1800', Parts I and II; Spengler, *France faces depopulation*.

<sup>4</sup> His most influential publication was *Dépopulation et civilisation*; additionally he published *Natalité et démocratie* and *La Morale basée sur la démographie*. Having failed to acquire a permanent academic position, Dumont committed a bizarre suicide in 1902, fulfilling a plan he had formed in 1892 to

However, examination and discussion of falling fertility was placed on an entirely new footing of observational rigour in the next century, with the initiative taken by the British state in 1911 to use the decennial census of that year to conduct and (eventually) to publish a comprehensive survey of the fertility patterns for an entire, large nation.<sup>5</sup> The 1911 fertility census was taken throughout the British Isles but the results were separately analysed using somewhat different approaches by the General Register Offices of Scotland, of Ireland and of England and Wales.<sup>6</sup> It was the comprehensive investigation published by the GRO for England and Wales which has been by far the most intellectually and historiographically influential of these reports and for this reason it is the main focus of attention in the following study.

It is to be noted, therefore, that although the term 'Britain' is used in this book's title and frequently in the ensuing pages this almost always refers only to England and Wales and not to Scotland. This is certainly not because this author believes that the experience of fertility change in Scotland (or in Ireland, for that matter) was essentially similar to, or can be subsumed within, an account based on England and Wales.<sup>7</sup> As will become obvious in the course of Parts III and IV, it is one of the principal contentions of this study that there was no single national story of fertility decline in England or in Wales, let alone in 'Britain'. It will be argued below that the evidence from the 1911 census in fact shows that there were many distinct fertility and nuptiality régimes changing alongside each other within England and Wales. Michael Anderson and Donald Morse have recently published an important analysis of Scottish evidence which has also emphasised the existence there of a number of distinct regional demographic régimes.<sup>8</sup>

devote himself, unsalaried, to research for ten years by dividing his then-current capital into ten parts, one for each year. For further information, see Sutter, 'Un démographe engagé: Arsène Dumont (1849-1902)'.

<sup>5</sup> Although the US census of 1910 also asked for detailed fertility information, apparently there were no funds available for analysis or publication. It was only following the stimulus provided by prior publication of the British results that such work began to be undertaken in the late 1920s on the US census of 1910 (see below, pp. 14–15). It is to be noted that there was also a precedent on a much smaller scale in an official inquiry in Australia. In the new Australian Commonwealth (which came into existence on 1 January 1901 as a federation of the existing colonies), there had been a Royal Commission *On the Decline in the Birth-Rate and on the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales*, which published 2 volumes in 1904 (Government Printer: Sydney), using demographic statistics analysed and first published by T. A. Coghlan: *The decline of the birth rate of New South Wales*. Timothy A. Coghlan, 1857–1926, KCMG 1918, was an eminent civil servant, brought up in Sydney, who had supervised both the 1891 and 1901 censuses of New South Wales while holding the post of Government Statistician for New South Wales, 1886–1905. Source: *Who was who 1916–28*. For further information on Coghlan and the Royal Commission, see Hicks, *This sin and scandal*.

<sup>6</sup> The report of the fertility census in Scotland is to be found in *Census of Scotland, 1911*, Vol. III, Section F (PP 1914 XLIV); the report on Ireland's marital fertility is in *Census of Ireland, 1911*, General Report, Section XIV, (PP 1912–13 CXVIII).

<sup>7</sup> The standard recent secondary source on modern demographic history in Scotland is: Flinn (ed.), *Scottish population history*. There is no similar integrated volume for Ireland's modern demographic history but see: Connell, *The population of Ireland*; Arensberg and Kimball, *Family and community in Ireland*; O'Gráda, *Ireland before and after the famine*; O'Gráda, 'New evidence on the fertility transition in Ireland'.  
<sup>8</sup> Anderson and Morse, 'High fertility, high emigration, low nuptiality'.

The *Fertility of Marriage Report* was published by the General Register Office of England and Wales in two parts, in 1917 and in 1923.<sup>9</sup> It made available in full the results of the massive census investigation of 1911, with numerous useful tabulations and an exhaustive accompanying explanatory report. That this happened despite the intervention of the First World War and the Office's fulfilment of numerous additional duties, was largely a tribute to the dedication of its Superintendent of Statistics, Dr T. H. C. Stevenson, who had in fact been the original moving force behind the nation's fertility census, as will be shown in Part II, below.

The appearance in the 1920s of this authoritative confirmation and comprehensive description of changing fertility behaviour on a national scale fuelled international scientific curiosity and interest. A continuous flow of theories, studies and explanations to account for this remarkable cross-cultural phenomenon has subsequently proliferated. Indeed, the post-Second World War era has seen a further redoubling of efforts devoted to the study of human fertility change, so that the scale of institutional resources involved in such research has become quite unrecognisable by early twentieth-century standards. This has been especially the case since the 1960s, the decade in which the emotive ecological term 'Population Bomb' was first applied to the high-fertility populations of poor countries, as part of a campaign which successfully induced the US Congress to dispense massive funds for the design and implementation of family planning programmes for the populations of poor countries.<sup>10</sup>

*Fertility, class and gender in Britain, 1860–1940* necessarily follows in the wake of this complex historiographical inheritance: a long line of several generations of international social scientific and historical studies addressed to the problem of understanding how and why a widespread change in human fertility could occur. It is of the greatest importance that any new study should seek to comprehend the characteristics of this intellectual inheritance and its preoccupations. A particular burden in discharging this task follows from the early recognition of the international and cross-cultural nature of the phenomenon. Affecting virtually all societies of European extraction by the 1920s, it has always seemed an eminently reasonable methodological assumption that there must be some form of 'general' causation at work in the secular fertility falls that have occurred. As a result it is not only those studies which have been explicitly based upon British historical source materials which have been considered to throw light on falling fertility in Britain; nor are inquiries into the causes of historical fertility change in Britain considered entirely irrelevant to the explication of such change in other historical or even in contemporary, non-European societies. Consequently, to undertake a critical historiographical review is in principle an almost boundless enterprise and

<sup>9</sup> Census of 1911, Vol. XIII, *FMR*, Pt 1, Cd 8678, PP 1917–18 XXXV; Pt 2, Cd 8491, was published separately (not as a Parliamentary Paper) by HMSO in 1923.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Ehrlich's *The population bomb* was the most widely read of a number of such admonitory publications in the 1960s. The continuity throughout the period ever since is symbolised in the publication of *The population explosion*, on the same theme by the same author (with Anne Ehrlich) in 1990.

therefore in practice an inevitably selective one. In a sense this task takes up fully half of this study: Parts I and II.

Part I provides a critical historiographical review of the field since the 1920s. While much has been learned in detail from the many and varied approaches, it is noted that they have all shared, explicitly or by default, the same general conception of the nature – the social and historical *form* – of the phenomenon which they address. Falling fertility in England and Wales has been treated by all as essentially a unitary, national process or event. It is usually acknowledged that it was a process differentiated in its social incidence according to the graded class structure of society at this time, but the object of study is decidedly '*the fertility decline*'.

Part II of this study is entirely taken up with investigation of exactly how and why falling fertility in Britain came to be so unanimously conceptualised as taking this particular social form. Ever since the phenomenon of a secular fall in fertility was first noticed in Britain around the turn of the century, contemporary social scientists and commentators appear to have assessed and measured its incidence and significance in terms of social class. The official *Fertility of Marriage Report* compiled by T. H. C. Stevenson from the 1911 census inquiry is no exception to this. In fact it was this document which was the *font* – if not the ultimate *origo* – of this particular empirical representation of the phenomenon. There is nothing necessarily untoward in this consensus, supposing, of course, that it is empirically well founded. It is somewhat disconcerting, therefore, to realise that no independent assessment of the validity of this representation of the 1911 census evidence has ever been undertaken throughout the many decades which have since elapsed.

Part II shows how it was the occasion of the national fertility inquiry of 1911 which itself gave birth to the particular unitary, hierarchical model of the nation's class structure which I have termed 'the professional model'. The professional model of fertility decline formed the original, authoritative official interpretation of the empirical evidence collected in 1911 and it is this which has remained the largely unquestioned point of departure for all subsequent students of the subject. The professional model was, therefore, simultaneously a depiction of the social incidence of falling fertility in England and Wales and an implicit general model of the nation's social structure, in which role it has been officially retained to the present day.

Part II shows that the professional model of class-differential fertility decline was a classification scheme imposed in advance upon the empirical data collected at the 1911 census. It was a classification generated by a long-running and intense, but now defunct, contemporary policy debate between hereditarian eugenicists and environmentalists of the public health movement. This professional model of social classes has never, therefore, had any formal correspondence with any currently recognised social or political theory of class or of stratification – Marxist, Weberian or other.

More importantly for the central concerns of this study, nor has the professional model of fertility decline ever been the subject of any independent exercise to verify or assess its adequacy as a summary of the evidence collected in 1911. Its ancient claims to adequacy rest purely on incumbency. Part III therefore commences with a statistical examination of this official, class-differential model of fertility decline. It is found wanting in many respects.

Once thus emancipated from the intellectual strait-jacket of the professional model, the rich source of social and demographic evidence contained in the published tables of the 1911 census is then re-examined in the remaining chapters of Part III for the new light which it may be capable of throwing upon how and why fertility and marriage patterns changed in England and Wales during the critical period before the Great War. The ensuing empirical analysis exploits the detailed fertility and nuptiality information for over 200 male and female occupational subdivisions of the population of England and Wales. This shows that during this period there were many distinct histories of fertility change among the different social groups and industrial communities of Britain. The occupational fertility evidence is also used to mount a thorough examination of the current 'spacing' versus 'stopping' debate regarding family limitation. Part III concludes with an evaluation of the possible methods used to restrict fertility, combining what has been learned from the 1911 census data with a reappraisal of other contemporary sources of testimony.

In addition to the central theme of fertility, the book's title focuses attention on the concepts of class and gender. In fact, the relationship between class and fertility change is subjected to substantial revision and deconstruction in Part II of this study. As will become apparent in Parts III and IV, occupation, communication communities, social identity and sexuality are considered to be every bit as important as class and gender in coming to an understanding and explanation of fertility change in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain.

In conclusion in Part IV it is suggested that a general approach can be formulated for the study of changing fertility in British history. This provides the basis for the new historical interpretation that is offered of falling fertilities in modern Britain and it is suggested that it may also have a wider application and viability as an heuristic framework for use in a variety of historical and even contemporary contexts.