

BOOK REVIEWS

SZRETER, SIMON. *Fertility, class and gender in Britain, 1860–1940*. [Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time, 27.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 1996. xix, 704 pp. £50.00; \$74.95.

As unchecked population growth is one of the world's most pressing problems, family planning rightly forms a crucial subject of social scientific research. This research has an important historical dimension, because knowledge of the origins of fertility change in the past may yield relevant clues for present-day policy. As is well known, marital fertility declined rapidly in most Western societies from the late nineteenth century onwards. This process is widely seen as an integral part of the "demographic transition", in which fertility, preceded by mortality, responded to the modernization of science and economy. The notion of demographic transition has been very influential in the period after 1945, but its origins go back to the beginning of this century. To be more precise, they can be traced to the British *Fertility of Marriage Report*, published in 1917 and 1923 by the General Register Office, being an analysis of data on fertility in the census of 1911. In this Report, T.H.C. Stevenson, the Superintendent on Statistics, used a five-layer classification of occupations to demonstrate how marital fertility declined from top to bottom in society. The highest, most educated, "professional" class appeared to take the lead in fertility control, being the first to use the new contraceptive techniques, whereas the class of "unskilled manuals" lagged far behind, exhibiting the highest fertility. The message was clear: effective family planning was simply a matter of improving educational standards and living conditions for the poorest in society. In propagating the "diffusion model" of fertility control the Report has been very influential in subsequent demographic theorizing. Furthermore, Stevenson's occupational classification, which was constructed specifically for the fertility census, became the official representation of British social structure.

In *Fertility, class and gender* Simon Szreter presents a new analysis of the published figures in the *Fertility of Marriage Report*. This may seem unspectacular to a readership currently being dazzled by studies based on large-scale and inventive computerized family reconstructions. However, this book promises to become a landmark in the historiography of demographic behaviour. Szreter succeeds in shattering the conventional image of fertility decline as a national, socially graded, unitary process of diffusion. In substantiating his thesis that there were in fact many fertility declines, he weaves an extremely intricate, yet compelling, image of the interplay between family-building strategies, gender and labour relations, and broader cultural and economic changes.

In the first, introductory part of the book Szreter gives a lucid overview of the various approaches to the phenomenon of fertility decline. The second part, more than two hundred pages long, is entirely devoted to an intellectual history of the origins of the 1911 fertility census and in particular its occupational classification. For a long time, the General Register Office had refrained from presenting a socio-economic differentiation of its demographic data. Because of

International Review of Social History 41 (1996), pp. 421–435

its commitment to the public health movement, the Office saw as its prime task the production of statistics showing clear local differentials in mortality, which would persuade politicians in unhealthy areas to ameliorate their environment. Szreter describes the many scientific, cultural and political influences that finally led to the Office adopting an occupational classification. Among these influences, social Darwinism in the form of eugenics loomed large. Eugenicists like Francis Galton and Karl Pearson, who argued that qualities such as skill and intelligence were hereditary, predicted national degeneration because the superior classes were not reproducing at the same rate as the lower classes. The poor quality of the urban recruits during the Boer War seemed to vindicate these beliefs and provoked public inquiries on "physical deterioration" (1903–1904). With the fertility census, the General Register Office hoped to refute the aggressively voiced claims of the eugenicists. In order to do so, the statistical material had to be classified according to the eugenicists' distinctions. Stevenson's final model distinguished between professional, skilled manual and unskilled manual classes, with two intermediate classes in between. To be sure, the superior position of the professionals reflected the self-image of all liberal intellectuals in this period. Szreter convincingly shows how Stevenson's a priori adoption of the diffusion model of fertility decline led to the simplified presentation of the observed occupational variation in fertility. The initial grouping, which was composed of eight classes with separate positions for miners, textile workers and agricultural labourers, was abandoned in favour of the five-classes scheme because the latter was better suited to the need for an elegant and simple explanation.

In part III Szreter presents his own analysis of fertility levels, on the basis of the tables in the *Fertility of Marriage Report*. In particular, he looks at completed marital fertility of women who married in the period 1881–1885 and whose age at marriage was 20–24 years. They were classified according to the occupation of their husbands; 195 different occupational groups were used in all. Using various statistical techniques Szreter shows that Stevenson's professional model has no predictive value for the actual fertility behaviour. He then goes on to reclassify the original 195 groups into 50 occupational categories. However, this appears to be based on a rather impressionistic combination of fertility levels on the one hand and Szreter's assessment of "[. . .] workings conditions and degree of control over [the] work processes [. . .]" (p. 319) on the other. As such, his methodological approach is not unlike Stevenson's.

Notwithstanding this objection, a fascinating behavioural landscape (p. 312) emerges which forms the basis for Szreter's further reflections. Professionals were not the archetypical forerunners of birth control. Similar or even lower marital fertility was found among a variety of groups, such as lodging-house keepers, tobacconists, and persons living on private means. Among the working class there was a strong variation, with textile workers having very low marital fertility and miners, dock labourers, and iron and steel workers having high fertility. One of the most important exercises in the book reveals that relatively low fertility was achieved early in marriage, and often in combination with a high age at marriage. Szreter concludes that *spacing* the interval between births by means of low coital frequency in combination with coitus interruptus was the principal means of birth control. Therefore, the decline of marital fertility was not an innovation based on new techniques but the intensified use of traditional methods deeply ingrained in British culture. Sexual self-control,

amounting to abstinence within marriage, was the norm among upper and lower classes alike well into the twentieth century.

All this does not disclose why fertility declined when and where it did. In fact, Szreter's material, in essence based on one marital cohort interviewed in 1911, is not particularly suited to answer this question. In the final chapters of the book he endeavours to build a general model of fertility variation and decline, but this part of the book is, of necessity, the most speculative. According to Szreter, fertility varies because of changes in the *perceived relative costs of child rearing*. This is by no means the simple, economic formula it may appear to be. The costs (relative to benefits) are not to be measured in financial terms alone, because emotional and cultural aspects are of similar importance. The perceiving agents extend beyond the parents to the wider local community. Their perception of changes need not be conscious, as it may take the form of an adaptation to very gradual shifts in norms. Whether altered perceptions will be translated into new family-building strategies depends crucially on the relationship between spouses, which is strongly influenced by gender divisions, particularly in the labour market.

Building on his impressive knowledge of British social history, Szreter ingenuously applies his formula to the fertility levels of many different social groups. For instance, the low marital fertility of textile workers is linked to the importance of female and child employment in this sector. In contrast with other sectors, unionized males did not succeed in securing an exclusive position and concomitant "family wages" in the textile labour market. Because of the wife's contribution to the family income, it was vital that she was not encumbered with too many births early in marriage. Only when her first children started to work could she devote more of her time to the family. Important in this setting is the relative equality of gender work roles, which appears a crucial prerequisite for successfully negotiated fertility reduction. The unforeseen effect of the government regulations restricting child labour was to intensify female labour participation and to reduce fertility even further.

Szreter convincingly shows why a further reduction of family size made sense in the economic and cultural contexts of various social groups. For some groups, notably poor families living on homework, survival meant having large families. However, Szreter's formula does not elucidate why well-paid and exclusively male sectors such as mining had such high, or even increasing, levels of fertility. Is the absence of "opportunity costs" in itself enough reason for having a large number of children? The author emphasizes the importance of "community" in determining occupational variation in fertility. Particularly among the working classes, local communities formed the "information contexts" that guided behaviour. They could fulfil this function because, in the late nineteenth century, reduced mobility made workers' communities more homogenous. But just how strongly were occupations clustered in communities, and how did occupational groups in mixed communities behave? Particularly because Szreter's own statistical data do not deal with local variations at all, the need for an empirical testing of this hypothesis is strongly felt.

It will be interesting to see how historical demographers take up the challenges this book offers. For instance, will the image of fertility decline as a unitary process be similarly shattered in other countries? The relevance of the book extends to the wider fields of social and family history. Presently, the notion

of family strategy is a much discussed subject because it may enable the historian to relate family dynamics on the one hand to changing labour-market conditions and working-class politics on the other. Szepter shows how family-building strategies are influenced by the development of community cultures and of gendered roles on both the work floor and within the family. *Fertility, class and gender* will therefore play an essential role in subsequent discussions.

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GALLISSOT, RENÉ, NADIR BOUMAZA [et] GHISLAINE CLÉMENT. *Ces migrants qui font le prolétariat*. [Reponses sociologiques.] Meridiens Klincksieck, Paris 1994. iv, 257 pp. F.fr. 130.00.

Over the last two decades European sociologists and historians have turned their attention to the issue of immigration; in doing so they have merely followed the headlines and news reports that have made migration a major issue of social policy in most European countries. French historical studies of migration have proven a particularly rich field of study. Part of the reason is that, unlike most other European nations, France itself has a long history of receiving migrants. During the nineteenth century when the German states, Italy, the Russian Empire, Scandinavia and the United Kingdom were sending millions across the sea, France was already receiving immigrants from nearby countries. French historiography and sociology have especially concentrated on locating the great wave of post-World War II immigrants with respect to the experiences and lessons of earlier waves. While mainly concerned with the plight of working-class immigrants in modern-day France or in the recent past, Gallissot, Boumaza and Clément have a lot to say about migration and its contribution to class formation in France over the last hundred years.

Gallissot, Boumaza and Clément indict the policies of French socialists, Communists and trade unionists, attacking facile historical generalizations about migration and class that have established a tenacious hold on the French Left. Particular targets of this study are the view that migrants can be divided between permanent migrants, destined for ready assimilation into the French working class, and returning migrants, tied culturally, economically and politically to the sending country. They remind us that the passage from immigrants to Frenchmen and women has never been easy. They stress that, from the point of view of even left-wing migrants, the Popular Front brought a new nationalism to socialist and Communist parties and trade unions. This nationalism culminated in the Resistance claim to have saved French national honor from right-wing betrayal and a series of post-war compromises with colonialism that created enduring tensions between native workers and colonial newcomers. Gallissot, Boumaza and Clément also condemn the "economism" of a class analysis that has focused on the workplace while ignoring questions of migrant unemployment, equal housing, lack of voting rights and cultural concerns. Too often, the failure to consider the plight of the unemployed migrant has been justified by the assumption (or hope) that they would simply return to their country of origin. And far from simply leaving aside issues of equal housing, French Communist municipalities have been notably unwelcome to the presence, in their territory, of government housing projects with large numbers of immigrants. Even in the