

Low Fertility in Italy between Explanatory Factors and Social and Economic Implications: Consequences for the Research

La bassa fecondità in Italia tra fattori esplicativi e implicazioni socio-economiche: conseguenze per la ricerca

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Riassunto: I livelli particolarmente bassi di fecondità sperimentati dall'Italia negli ultimi quindici anni sollecitano, da un lato, riflessioni sui fattori che sono all'origine del fenomeno, dall'altro, considerazioni sugli effetti di medio e lungo periodo che ciò potrà avere sulla società italiana. Il presente lavoro: a) riflette su questi aspetti all'interno di un più generale quadro evolutivo europeo dei comportamenti familiari e riproduttivi; b) individua alcuni ambiti e strategie di ricerca promettenti per comprendere meglio i meccanismi che sono all'origine della bassa fecondità.

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1. Fertility trends in Italy

Against all expectations, the long term reduction in fertility reached its peak in those countries of the Mediterranean area which had begun the process late and which seem reluctant to abandon traditional family models in order to adopt the new behaviours of the Second Demographic Transition (Van de Kaa, 1987). In Italy, after the baby-boom which culminated in a Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of 2.7 in 1964, the average number of children per woman continued to decrease: in 1977 it fell below the replacement level (2.1) for the first time; in 1993 it fell below the 1.3 level for the first time, considered by several scholars to be a critical threshold; and in 1995 it reached a minimum of 1.18. From 1996 onwards the TFR has registered a slight increase and the most recent data estimated by Istat sets the average number of children per woman for 2000 at 1.24. After the 1960s all European countries experienced a phase of reduction of the period fertility. In most cases however such a decline only rarely registered fertility rates below 1.4 children per woman and, between the second half of the 80s and the first half of the 90s, the decline ended in a stabilisation of the rates at levels which were not excessively low or even in an inversion of trend (table 1). In Italy, Spain and Greece, on the other hand, the TFR continued its descending trend reaching extremely low values quite unique in Europe. However, weak signs of an inversion in this trend emerged in the late 90s which lead us to suppose that the historical minimum has already been reached.

It is well known that the TFR is a poor indicator of the growth or decline potential of the population in that it is influenced by both the quantum and tempo of cohort behaviour. In particular, when there is an increase in average age at childbirth among

the cohorts it tends to overestimate the decline of fertility. The last decades of the last century did in fact witness such a phenomenon. After adjustments due to the rarefying of high order births, the average age at childbirth of women born in the second half of the 20th century increased slightly in all European countries. For some populations of central and northern Europe it would seem that, at least at an early stage, the moving of the reproductive process to an older age is resolved by a recovery among the over-thirties of the fertility “lost” in the first half of fertile life (Freika e Calot, 2001). For these countries, therefore, the drop in period fertility is not initially the expression of a reduction in the final number of offspring of the birth-cohorts but only a drift of the occurrence towards the thirtieth birthday. The estimates concerning the dynamics of cohort fertility calculated by Istat (Istat, 1997) show this could not be the case in Italy. The postponement of reproductive activity to over thirty, which also concerns our country, is not compensated by the fertility of cohorts after the thirtieth birthday. The average number of children decreases in all orders – in particular in those with an order greater than two – and the overall number of offspring, in the space of little more than ten or so generations, falls from 1.9 (born in 1950) to 1.6 (born in 1963). Estimates of fertility per cohort obtained on more recent data (De Sandre et al., 1997) tend to indicate that women born in the early 1960s may have actually expressed a greater recovery potential and that their fertility may be a little higher than Istat estimated. With generations born around 1970, however, the process of postponement of family events to relatively high ages is so accentuated that it is difficult to imagine that these cohorts will not have a further drop in the number of offspring.

How should we interpret the slight recovery of the TFR in recent years, considering it concerns the precise regions which had reached the lowest levels of period fertility? The relative newness of the phenomenon and the absence of information on a national scale concerning the structure of fertility for the second half of the 90s require a certain amount of caution. Nevertheless, some recent works allow us to state that: a) the increase in period fertility is not attributable only to the fertility of immigrant women but also to native fertility; b) a slowing down in the process of “postponement” of fertility to older ages most certainly affects the evolution of period fertility; c) in some strongly urbanised realities, the 70s cohorts seem to adopt new reproductive behaviours more similar to those of countries with a more advanced stage of Second Demographic Transition.

2. Implications of period dynamics

Period fertility experienced in Italy in the last twenty years is affecting both the amount and the structure by age and this could have important effects on the equilibrium of society itself. Theoretically, a TFR of 1.3 implies an average annual reduction rate of 1.5% in a stable population with an average age at childbirth of 30. This scenario means the birth cohort and the population halve every 45 years. It is the speed of change underlying these results which is strongly destabilising since it is unlikely that a community can “adapt” in time to such an evolution (Golini, 1999). Moreover, this phenomenon has indirect demographic consequences: the reduction and aging of the reproducing population in turn presents another factor of birth reduction which may cancel out the positive effects of a possible increase in the fertility rate to levels similar to those found in northern European countries.

In reality the evolution is less dramatic. In the last 20 years the number of births has tended to decrease although with some fluctuations. In 1980 the number of births was just over 640 thousand; in 2000 there were little more than 538 thousand. The minimum was reached in 1998 (515,000 births) and since then births have been rising. According to the latest Istat forecasts, which foresee a period TFR of 1.4 children per woman for 2010 and 2030 and a positive migratory balance (111 thousand units per year), the Italian population will not begin to decrease before 2010. In that year Italy will have a population of 58.5 million against the 57.7 million registered in 2000. In 2010 a gradual drop will begin which will grow over time and in 2050 Italy will have a population of 52.2 million. Despite an annual quota of 121 thousand foreigners entering the country each year, the aging of the population is inevitable. If in 2000 for every 100 elderly persons there were 80 young people, in 2010 this number will drop to 68 and in 2050 will collapse to 33. The structure for the age of the population at working age also grows older: for the same years the number of people between the ages of 15 and 39 per 100 people between the ages of 40 and 64 is respectively 111, 85 and 78.

All this will have cultural, political and organisational implications and consequences on the balance between generations (Sartor, 2001).

3. Explanatory factors for low fertility in Italy

The explanation for fertility levels in Italy is based on several premises: a) every birth is the result of a decision process in which the couples/individuals consider, more or less consciously, the costs and the benefits which the birth of a child involves; b) many factors influence the decision process and depend on both particular conditions of the individuals and the local social context; c) the trends and mechanisms the theories evoke to explain the dynamics of fertility in the last thirty years operate in every country but their effect changes in accordance with the specific history, culture and economy of each population (Chesnais, 1999).

Relatively low Italian fertility arises from the difficulty the generations born after 1950 have had in combining the new needs for self-fulfilment derived from the spread of an individualistic and post-materialistic culture (Van de Kaa, 1994) with an ideational and structural context which in some ways stimulated self-investment, and in others made committing oneself to the role of parent particularly onerous for individuals, and in particular for women. Four factors (some shared with other European countries) appear - which at times reinforce each other - and which can explain the dynamics of fertility over the last thirty years. The first is a conservative welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 1999): here we have the model of a male breadwinner and most tasks of care and assistance of society's weakest individuals are delegated to the family. The second is a gender system which again assigns most activities of raising children and domestic work in general to women (McDonald, 2001), thus preventing a re-balancing of commitments between genders above all in presence of women engaged in the work market. The third factor is familism (Dalla Zuanna, 2001): the presence of a familistic culture, which makes adults feel personally responsible for the well-being of their family, further burdens the work of a parent. The last factor comes from the economic-institutional circumstances which Italy experienced above all in the 70s and 80s and which led to relatively high ambitions among individuals and families for social mobility and, more generally, for improvements in lifestyles.

The lack of re-balancing in gender relations and the failure of the principal social institutions (in particular the employment market and welfare system) to adapt to rapid cultural changes (individualism; the new role of women) made raising a child more onerous for Italian women than elsewhere. The familistic behaviour and values on the one hand, and the emergence of specific - and perhaps unique - opportunities of self-fulfilment and social elevation on the other, have emphasised this result. A reduction in fertility therefore becomes the effect of a complex interaction between individual inclinations and social norms; between innovation and tradition; between constraints and resources of individuals and couples. The increasing postponement (Micheli, 1999) in family events in recent cohorts of young people is encouraged by a social context of this type: its possible fertility discouraging effects intervene only as a second level factor.

4. Consequences for the research

In the last decade much progress has been made on both the theoretical and methodological front (Palloni, 2000). The birth of a child is the result of a decision process at a micro level which feels the effects of context components (meso and macro levels) with which it interacts in a recursive way. Most births within regimes of strongly controlled fertility result from a complex decision by individuals which involve: economic and cultural evaluations; the personal biography – life history and hopes for the future (and therefore also both personal expectations and projects and those of family members). Some elements arise from institutional and cultural aspects. But the context is not an exogenous variable: the cumulative effect of single fertility behaviours changes it, creating new conditions in which individuals find themselves making their decisions at a micro level. The methodology has acknowledged some instances of complexity. The multilevel models, the biography analysis techniques (complicated by the introduction of a multilevel approach or by latent variables), the multistate hazard models, and the micro simulation models are in this direction.

International comparisons and contamination by other disciplines have been important in encouraging reflection on the determinants of fertility dynamics. The carrying-out of surveys at an international level on values (Moors and Palomba, 1998) and behaviour (Pinnelli, 2001) has allowed the traditionally poor official data available at a macro level to be surpassed and has given us a more analytical and targeted idea of the differences between western industrialised countries. This has encouraged more articulated reflection on the mechanisms of low fertility and has represented an empirical reference for those who proposed explanatory hypotheses along other lines. The contamination by other disciplines has proved to be productive both on a theoretical and methodological level. The concept of diffusion goes back to epidemiology; the concept of social interaction derives from sociology; the sequence analysis methods arise from genetics; qualitative surveys are important instruments in anthropology.

In the near future research in this field will have to learn to measure and govern complexity and to better isolate the mechanisms which underlie fertility dynamics. A first objective could be to improve the understanding of the process which leads to the decision to have or not to have a child. To this end possible steps are: to better highlight the role of cultural factors on factual ones; to pay attention to the elements of project making in the life course; to introduce recursive relationships between the variables.

Panel surveys and some qualitative techniques (e.g. in-depth interviews) may be important instruments in observing reality, as well as case-control type studies. A second objective could be to deepen theoretical reflection on the various cultural contexts which dominate in European countries.

All this may prove to be of particular interest in a country like Italy which would appear to be on the eve of a new evolutionary phase which is not certain to head towards behaviours already experienced by other central-northern European countries or perhaps towards a new equilibrium resulting from its particular Mediterranean history.

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Table 1: Trends in total fertility rates, 1980-2000 - Northern Central, and Southern Europe

	1980	1985	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
NORTHERN EUROPE													
Denmark	1.55	1.45	1.67	1.68	1.76	1.75	1.81	1.80	1.75	1.75	1.72	1.73	1.77
Finland	1.63	1.64	1.78	1.80	1.85	1.81	1.85	1.81	1.76	1.75	1.70	1.74	1.73
Norway	1.72	1.68	1.93	1.92	1.89	1.86	1.87	1.87	1.89	1.86	1.81	1.84	1.85
Sweden	1.68	1.74	2.13	2.11	2.09	1.99	1.88	1.73	1.60	1.52	1.50	1.50	1.54
WESTERN EUROPE													
Belgium	1.68	1.51	1.62	1.66	1.65	1.61	1.56	1.55	1.59	1.60	1.60	1.61	1.66
Netherlands	1.60	1.51	1.62	1.61	1.59	1.57	1.57	1.53	1.53	1.56	1.63	1.65	1.72
France	1.95	1.81	1.78	1.77	1.73	1.66	1.66	1.71	1.73	1.73	1.76	1.79	1.89
United Kingdom	1.89	1.80	1.89	1.82	1.79	1.76	1.74	1.71	1.73	1.72	1.71	1.68	1.65
Ireland	3.24	2.48	2.15	2.11	2.02	1.93	1.86	1.87	1.90	1.92	1.93	1.88	1.89
CENTRAL EUROPE													
Austria	1.65	1.47	1.45	1.50	1.49	1.48	1.44	1.40	1.42	1.37	1.34	1.32	1.34
Switzerland	1.55	1.52	1.59	1.58	1.58	1.51	1.49	1.48	1.50	1.48	1.47	1.48	1.50
Germany	1.56	1.37	1.45	1.33	1.30	1.28	1.24	1.25	1.32	1.37	1.36	1.36	1.36
Luxembourg	1.49	1.38	1.60	1.60	1.67	1.69	1.72	1.69	1.76	1.71	1.68	1.73	1.79
SOUTHERN EUROPE													
Greece	2.22	1.67	1.39	1.38	1.38	1.34	1.35	1.32	1.30	1.31	1.29	1.30	1.29
Italy	1.68	1.45	1.36	1.33	1.33	1.26	1.21	1.18	1.20	1.21	1.21	1.22	1.24
Portugal	2.25	1.72	1.57	1.58	1.55	1.52	1.44	1.40	1.44	1.46	1.46	1.49	1.50
Spain	2.20	1.63	1.34	1.30	1.29	1.25	1.20	1.18	1.17	1.18	1.16	1.20	1.24

Sources: Istat (1997); Council of Europe (2001).

Data on Italy 1997-2000 have kindly been supplied by Dr. G. Gualtieri - Istat.