

Why demographics and political economy are inseparable

March 11 2015, by Wolfgang Streeck



Societies need new blood in order to renew and to survive – just how much new blood is a divisive issue.

Births and birth rates are normally subjects for family sociology or demographics. So what are they doing in a research programme on the political economy of modern capitalism?

A great deal – so much that it's hard to imagine how they can possibly even begin to be understood without reference to politics and economics. Take these couple of examples, for instance: The low and falling birth rates in rich capitalist societies are not only the result of easier access to effective means of contraception, but also the consequence of a rapid

increase in female employment since the end of the 1960s. Without this, birth rates would have fallen much less sharply, if at all, in spite of contraception. In parallel to and associated with the employment of women, there has also been a change in family structures; marriages are less the norm, divorces and living together being more common. And even though the share of children born out of wedlock is rising in almost all OECD countries – indeed, in some of them the number of illegitimate children being born already exceeds by some margin the number of legitimate children coming into the world – married women are still having more children than [unmarried women](#).

Further research is necessary

The correlation between female participation in the workforce, family structures and births is multifaceted and not nearly well enough investigated. Having their own income makes women more independent and results in looser partner relationships. All else being equal, the latter depresses the birth rate, especially if precarious partnerships coincide with precarious or particularly demanding employment circumstances ("careers"). This applies most notably to the middle classes, where women are moved by economic uncertainty or the desire to climb the career ladder, or the fact that they have not met the right partner yet or that they have a partner who cannot be relied upon, to decide not to have children at all or to put off having children – not infrequently until it's too late. At the bottom end of society, where poverty reigns, the number of children born into precarious circumstances is on the rise again as women seek to compensate for the fact that they have not been successful in the search for work or for a partner.

Societies need new blood in order to renew and to survive – how much new blood is a divisive issue. What's beyond dispute is the fact that most rich capitalist societies are themselves no longer in a position or no longer prepared to produce the number of children needed to keep the

population constant; this applies even to countries with successful population policies like Sweden or France. Societies that are unable, on their own accord, to plug the gaps rent in them by death can replenish or supplement their number by means of immigration. Immigrants, at least first generation incomers, generally have higher birth rates than the local population and thereby help to stabilise the population. This can sometimes come at the price of very high integration costs – which are borne by the local families in the traditional "standard case" of self-supplementation – and social conflicts, as are on the rise in some European countries now, with no end in sight.

Kids, costs, and conflicts

Societies that consider themselves over-aged or, according to sociologist Franz-Xaver Kaufmann, "under-young", can also attempt to ensure sufficient new blood in spite of changed social structures. But that, too, has its costs, namely the replacement of formerly unpaid family care with public or private sector services, particularly for the care of small children. This being about the next generation, the quality of care outside the family can never be high enough, which constantly pushes the costs up. Outsourcing a large part of childcare out of the changed family structures thereby reflects the expansion of employment markets in government budgets in the form of an expansion of government activity.

States that do not want this must open their labour markets to people willing to work as private nannies looking after the offspring of the middle classes – on affordable, low pay. Generally, this will mean extra immigration, additional conflicts and growing economic and social inequality, the immigrants contributing to the increase in the number of children in two ways: with their own children and by enabling the better-earning couples or individuals to achieve a "work-life balance".

Societies which trap women and men alike in "careers" and always endeavour to make each and every person work longer and harder – partly as a means of paying off the higher costs of human capital – need to rethink what they are doing in many respects. In view of the fact that the number of marriages, not to mention stable marriages, is constantly on the decline they need to make it easier for unmarried women to have children even without a reliable or permanent partner. Being an unmarried mother must become socially acceptable and socio-politically possible – otherwise we'll have situations like in Japan or Italy, where neither is the case and where [birth rates](#) are consequently lower than anywhere else in the OECD world.

The rich capitalist societies of the future are more than just work societies, they are also consumer societies. Consumption patterns are barely determined by material needs any more but increasingly by social norms instead. They make certain costly and time consuming experiences essential for social approval, thus raising them to the status of social obligations. Having children, particularly having several at once, makes it more difficult to perform these obligatory duties of consumption and experience, especially since obtaining the necessary material means to do so requires intense professional commitment. While efforts to make children an attractive alternative to long-haul travelling or SUVs for young couples are under way in many places, they appear to be enjoying very limited success so far.

Towards a capitalist totalitarianism?

The [political economy](#) of fertility behaviour in the societies of advanced capitalism throws up some difficult moral problems, not only in connection with immigration and reproductive medicine and the possibilities it offers for adjusting women's childbearing abilities to the needs of their careers. A subject that we must face up to is the growing call, still often implicit these days but to an increasing extent also being

heard explicitly, for what I would refer to as "social eugenics". This would involve providing families with state support based on the anticipated "quality" of the children they produce instead of on their needs.

"Academics", so the principle goes, bear children who will, as young adults, be more intelligent, more willing to work, more adjusted and so on than the many, sadly much greater in number, children of unemployed supermarket checkout assistants living on welfare. Shouldn't we cut their state benefits and give the money to others so that the one category would have more children and the other fewer? What we need to be aware of, though, is that where the line is drawn between good and bad [children](#) based on the predicted return on their human capital, that's where capitalist totalitarianism begins.

Provided by Max Planck Society

Citation: Why demographics and political economy are inseparable (2015, March 11) retrieved 5 October 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-03-demographics-political-economy-inseparable.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.