SOCIOLOG 285E Special topics in Sociology

Population Change in the Low Countries, 1750-2050: Demographic Transition in Belgium and the Netherlands

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Course website and material: https://moodle2.sscnet.ucla.edu/course/view/19S-SOCIOL285E-1

SUBJECT MATTER

Where does the Western marriage pattern of late and non-universal marriage come from? Have people always been controlling their fertility or did the demographic transition imply a shift from natural to controlled fertility? How can we understand baby booms and baby busts? And how have changing gender relations been affecting people’s reproductive behaviors? These questions will be at the heart of the 2019 course given by prof. Jan Van Bavel in the context of the Antoon Van Dyck Chair.

The Low Countries have turned out to be a kind of natural laboratory for social and demographic changes that were witnessed throughout the West, including the United States. Geographically speaking, this is only a small part of Europe but is has a very rich history which has led to exceptional religious and linguistic diversity, providing a microcosm of diversity found on a larger scale elsewhere.

In this course seminar, we will review the history of population change in “the Low Countries”, covering more or less the territory of the countries of today’s Belgium and the Netherlands. We start by taking stock of the demographic situation at the end of the Ancien Régime, i.e. at the end of the Early Modern period just before the French Revolution, and how emerging demographic patterns (later seen also in the rest of the West) were linked with the political and socio-cultural situation. Next, we cover the onset of the demographic transition, again discussing how the story was different in different parts of the Low Countries and how this was linked with religious and linguistic diversity. Special attention will be devoted to the Interbellum, i.e. the period between the First and the Second World War, and the subsequent Baby Boom period.

The Low Countries were also the cradle of the theory of the Second Demographic Transition, co-authored by two scholars born during the Baby Boom, Ron Lesthaeghe from Belgium and Dirk van de Kaa from the Netherlands. The seminar discusses the cultural and demographic context in which this theory was formulated and how the theory was subsequently applied to conceptualize population change across the world.
The last part of the seminar is devoted to ongoing and expected trends in the context of important changes in gender relations. This is a period characterized by sustained below-replacement fertility, major changes in family dynamics, and high immigration rates.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

1. Each student is expected to read the assigned material before each course meeting and prepare a short document that summarizes for each text from the course material (a) the broader big-picture concern to which the text relates, (b) how the text contributes more specifically to this broader concern in terms of specific research questions, data, and methodology, and (c) what the limitations are. In addition (d), each student prepares a discussion of the linkages between the different texts assigned for that week’s class. Identifying linkages with texts that were read earlier in this or other courses is strongly encouraged as well.

   In order to facilitate the preparation of each session, students are expected to post their weekly memos on the class discussion board on the night before each session, at the latest: https://moodle2.sscnet.ucla.edu/mod/forum/view.php?id=452760

2. The quarter project for the seminar is a short review paper or research proposal in which at least one topic covered in the class sessions is discussed from a comparative perspective, comparing the Low Countries with another region or country of the student’s choice. The choice of topic(s) and region or country is discussed with prof. Van Bavel and decided before May 16.

**GRADING**

The weekly memos contribute 65% to the final grade, the quarter project 35%.

**READINGS AND TOPICS PER CLASS SESSION**

The following list of course material represents the core material. Any additional material will depend on student backgrounds and interests.

**Session 1 The emergence of the Low Countries as a “natural laboratory” for demography**

In the first session of the seminar, professor Van Bavel will give a lecture that will explain why it is interesting from a general demographic science point of view to study population dynamics in the historical context of the Low Countries, and how a particularly interesting “natural laboratory” emerged over the course of a very complex history. This will be a crash course about how Belgium and the Netherlands emerged as two separate countries out of the Habsburg heritage after being united in the Burgundy era. Due to their complex histories, the two countries exhibit remarkable linguistic
and religious diversity in a very limited geographic space, while at the same time sharing many
cultural, economic and institutional traits. These will prove to be important for the subsequent scenario
of the demographic transition.

Optional readings related to the first seminar

A The standard textbook about the history of the Low Countries: Blom and Lamerts (1998),
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/BlomHistory

https://doi.org/10.1111/ehr.12667

Lucassen, J., & Lucassen, L. (2009). The mobility transition revisited , 1500 – 1900 : what the
case of Europe can offer to global history. Journal of Global History, (October), 347–
377. https://doi.org/10.1017/S174002280999012X

Esser, R. (2007). From Province to Nation : Immigration in the Dutch Republic in the Late
16th and Early 17th Centuries. In S. G. Ellis & L. Klusáková (Eds.), Imaging frontiers,
contesting identities. Edizioni Plus.

Session 2 A forerunner in the development of human capital and the emergence of the
Malthusian demographic regime (1500-1800)

The Low Countries were a key battlefield for the Protestant reformation and Catholic counter-
reformation, generating massive migration flows that have been decisive for today’s geographic-
demographic landscape of religious denominations. At the same time, the Church was increasing its
regulation of marriage. The North Sea area, where the Low Countries are to be situated, played a
leading role in the development of the modern Western marriage pattern. The emergence of the new
Malthusian marriage pattern in the North Sea area (England and the Low Countries in particular) helps
to explain, in turn, why these regions took the lead in economic developments, too.

Van Bavel, Bas J. P. (2002). People and land: rural population developments and property
structures in the Low Countries , c . 1300 – c . 1600. Continuity and Change, 17(1), 9–
37.

The Low Countries are reputed to have been a forerunner in the accumulation of human capital. This
is considered one of the reasons for its strong economic performance from the fifteenth to the
seventeenth century. In turn, the high level of human capital development has been related to the
development of the so-called Malthusian marriage pattern, emerging in North-Western Europe in the
Early Modern period. But how do we measure the development of human capital and how is it related
to marriage postponement and a high percentage of never marrying women?


Yet, as late and non-universal marriage became the norm, this also implied that this Malthusian social norm was sanctioned when broken in case of extra-marital sexual intercourse. Subsequently, extra-marital fertility was labelled “illegitimate fertility”, also in official statistics. Yet, between the middle of the 18th the middle of the 19th century, many Western countries experienced a surge in “illegitimate” fertility. We investigate and discuss to what extent this surge was due to the behavior of people at the social margins of society or whether this really was rather signaling a more general kind of sexual revolution.


**Session 3 Fertility control before the demographic transition?**

The Princeton project on the decline of European fertility yielded a new kind of consensus view of the fertility transition. While formerly it was conceived of as just a transition from high to low fertility, the Princeton project promoted a view that implied that it should rather be viewed as a transition from natural to controlled fertility. Yet, in more recent years, a growing group of historical demographers has called this view into question. The Princeton project proceeded based on aggregate data. This lecture will discuss how a younger generation of historical demographers have been using individual level life course data to investigate fertility control before the demographic transition.


**Session 4 Mortality differentials and mortality decline**

The demographic transition was kicked off by declining mortality levels. But even before the transition, levels varied a lot from year to year. Mortality was also linked to macro- and micro-level sociological factors, even though not always in the same way as one would expect. This class will discuss both differential mortality levels and mortality decline before and during the demographic transition.


**Session 5 The fertility transition: macro-level approach**

The standard interpretation of the demographic transition until the Princeton project was that it resulted from the modernization of social structures through industrialization and urbanization. Yet, the Princeton project yielded a number of insights that made clear that this explanation was wanting. For example, the fertility decline got started in countries that were lagging behind in economic modernization while England, which was at the forefront of industrialization, was not at the vanguard
of the fertility transition at all. Within the Princeton project, the work of Ron Lesthaeghe about the
decline of fertility in Belgium was particularly instrumental in raising international scholarly
awareness of the fact that cultural differences played a key role in the demographic scenario. This is
the topic of this lecture.

Coale, A.J. 1986. "The Decline of Fertility in Europe Since the Eighteenth Century As a
Chapter in Demographic History." Pp. 1-30 in The Decline of Fertility in Europe,
University Press.

Princeton University Press.

Engelen, T. L., & Hillebrand, J. H. (1986). Fertility and Nuptiality in the Netherlands, 1850-

Session 6 The fertility transition: micro-level

More recent work in historical demography has employed micro-level life course data to test
speculations about the role of cultural change in the decline of fertility. In this lecture we discuss the
role of religious differentials, processes of innovation diffusion, and the role of quality-quantity trade-
offs in parent’s reproductive behavior.

Van Bavel, J., & Kok, J. (2005). The role of religion in the Dutch fertility transition: starting, spacing,
and stopping in the heart of the Netherlands, 1845-1945. Continuity and Change. A Journal of
Social Structure, Law and Demography in Past Societies, 20(2), 247–263.

Fertility Transition, 1845-1945." Pp. 83-105 in Religion and the Decline of Fertility in the


Van Bavel, Jan. 2007. "The decline of illegitimacy and the control of marital fertility during the
demographic transition. Testing the innovation-diffusion hypothesis using cohort fertility data
from a Belgian town, 1850-1910." Historical Social Research - Historische Sozialforschung

quality-quantity trade-off during the demographic transition.” Journal of Biosocial Science
38(4): 553-569.

Session 7 The Interbellum: below-replacement fertility between the First and the Second World War
It is often forgotten that by the 1920s the decline of fertility had proceeded thus far in many Western countries that it was below the so-called replacement level for many years. The concept of replacement-level fertility as a demographic concept was actually developed in this era and it was used to raise concerns in public opinion and among politicians about population ageing, generating also concerns about the economic implications among leading economists of the time. In this lecture, we discuss how both behavior and scholarly interpretations of the demographic landscape were surprisingly modern, and actually very similar to later interpretations in terms of a so-called “second demographic transition”.


Session 8 Baby Boom
Given the concerns about below-replacement fertility during the interwar period, it came as a huge surprise to the general public and specialized scholars alike that fertility started to increase around the middle of the twentieth century. While this is often called the “post-war Baby Boom”, we discuss why this it is not entirely correct and actually misleading to call it “post-war”.


Suggested, optional reading:

Karl van den Broeck (2018), Doctor Ferdinand Peeters: The Real Father of the Pill.

Gompel&Svacina.

**Session 9 The Second Demographic Transition**

While early 21st century demographers formulated theories about how increasing wealth and economic modernization would lead to fertility decline – where scholar were asking the question if people in rich and so-called developed countries would still have children at all – demographers constructed theories about so-called “pro-cyclical fertility”, where fertility would go up when economic prospects were good and it would go down when the prospects were bad. To these theories, it again came as a surprise that the long-term trend of total fertility was downwards again, leading to fertility structurally below the replacement line. Again, it was Belgian Ron Lesthaeghe who called attention in the field to the role of cultural change – without downplaying the part played by the economy. This time, he developed and published his ideas together with his Dutch colleague and fellow Baby Boomer Dirk van de Kaa (their original joint paper was published in Dutch in the sociology journal “Mens & Maatschappij”). They proposed that a new, second demographic transition (SDT) has been unfolding since the second half of the 20th century, not just in the Low Countries but in the West in general, including the United States.


Session 10 A gender revolution?

From the beginning, the idea that a “second demographic transition” has been unfolding since the second half of the 20th century has met with criticism – although seldom voiced in an explicit manner. Today, alternative interpretations of ongoing demographic changes have come to the forefront.

One criticism of SDT-theory has been that it does not pay sufficient attention to the role of gender. The final lecture looks at these criticism and the role of ongoing gender changes in recent demographic developments.


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