

On research into human fertility and governmental action in post-modern societies

Introductory remarks at the EEC FFS-Flagship Conference, Brussels, 29-31 May 2000

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The creation of the Euro zone and the decline of the euro against the dollar which followed, has had the beneficial effect of revealing some of Europe's structural economic weaknesses. Two issues of Time magazine of this month spell them out without mercy. The issue of May 29, deals with 'Europe's pension crisis' and argues that the fiscal health of European countries is '... threatened by a demographic time bomb, ...'. That of May 8, discusses the problems of Europe's labour force which is described as being 'out of date...And out of work'. We may shrug such contributions off as rather transparent attempts to weaken the euro further. And indeed the Viewpoint in the latter issue discusses the future of the euro under the telling title 'Warning: Thin Ice'. But that is too easy. For one, that particular Viewpoint was written by the director of economic research of a Paris-based bank, and any European demographer will admit that the demographic differences between the euro and dollar zones which underlie part of the arguments - Europe's very low birth rate being one of these -, are very genuine.

Discussion at this meeting, the first FFS Flagship Conference I will ever attend, will focus on partnership and fertility. We will, no doubt, learn a great deal about recent developments and the needs for further research, and we will, possibly, hear pleas for action to stem the tide. I should like to begin the discussion by posing a silly question. As follows: Do fertility regimes of human populations have some sort of half-life just as we observe in the decay of radioactive particles? It is nonsense, of course, but that question occurred to me when I looked at the long term demographic processes observable in Europe since the beginning of serious population studies. It is very striking that for most of their histories the populations of Europe used at most half of their biological capacity to reproduce. While women would, on average, have given birth to 14 or 15 children if they had used their reproductive capacity to the full, average family size in pre-industrial Europe usually did not exceed 7. The demographic transition, which began in France and Hungary in the second quarter of the 18th century, brought that figure down to 3 or 4. Since the mid-sixties a further halving appears to have occurred. A standard European population now has a total fertility rate - an expected average family size, one might say - of about 1.5 children. Without much exaggeration we may conclude that, currently, European populations seldom use more, and frequently a great deal less, than 10% of their capacity to reproduce themselves.

It is well-known that this constellation, if sustained for a sufficiently long period, will inevitably lead to rapid ageing and a marked decline in population numbers. As Time magazine already noted, such prospects give rise to various speculations and concerns. It also poses difficult research questions. The most important of these appear to be: Why is fertility so low? How long will it remain so low? Have we

now reached rock bottom or could another halving occur? And, finally, what are the courses of action open to governments? Do research results indicate what action governments could take? I should like to reflect briefly on all of these questions.

First, then, the question whether a further halving of the fertility level could occur. Funnily enough, Italian demographer Antonio Golini has argued convincingly that the lowest level of fertility likely to be reached in any larger national population for any length of time, would, in fact, imply precisely that further halving. If 20 to 30 percent of all women were to remain childless and the remainder would stop after having had one child, the resulting total fertility rate would be half the current level, that is, it would result in about 0.75 children per woman. The statistical record to date supports the idea of the existence of such a lowest floor or threshold. Golini feels that it is, in particular, the innate desire to be a parent, to have a family, to play the role of mother and father, that will prevent fertility from falling below it. After all, so he reminds us, children and only children, can satisfy that desire. Golini also makes the point that if fertility were to drop lower than that very low threshold, reactions in society would probably be so strong that a recovery of fertility would result. He does not enlighten us as to the precise mechanisms that would create that miracle, but at this stage of play I will not hold that against him.

If one does not have a clue as to why fertility in Western countries has fallen to well below replacement level, discussing the probability of a further decline quickly turns into an effort to cycle on air. So let me, secondly, reflect on why currently fertility is so low. It is a truism to say that it is a manifestation of profound societal changes. But what, precisely, are those changes. Are they mainly economic in nature, are they cultural, or is it a consequence of changed contraceptive technology? Any attempt to answer questions of this type, involves crossing the borders of disciplines. We have to leave demography and should look at what economists, sociologists, and political scientists have to say about developments in our societies since the mid-sixties. I regret having to admit that, as yet, I am not sufficiently well versed in the relevant literature to speak with great authority on it. But, since professors are paid to have at least an opinion (ideally a different opinion), let me give you my assessment of the situation.

The various authors I have consulted see economic and technological changes give rise to the development of the modern welfare state. A post-industrial service economy with flexible specialisations, continuous restructurization, and concentration without centralization based on the extensive use of communication and information technology, becomes the standard. Social and cultural changes, result in individualisation and de-traditionalisation; social classes dissolve, primary groups (the family) lose part of their significance. To sum it up in one sentence: **simple modernisation** gives way to **reflexive modernisation**. Different authors come to different conclusions as to the precise consequences of this shift and regarding the most appropriate way of dealing with them. But, what the analyses appear to have in common, is that they stress the changed nature of risks in present day society. German sociologist Ullrich Beck stresses the dominance of side-effects over the original intention of governmental measures; it is no longer the lack of knowledge which creates risks, risks follow from increased knowledge. The possibilities to keep societal developments under central control are much reduced, the boundaries between science and politics, between public and private, and between what is part and not part of politics become blurred. Knowledge leads to reflexivity, to self-confrontation. Anthony Giddens, the Director of the London School of Economics and a respected advisor to the present UK Government, similarly points out that in our societies risks are mainly manufactured, they are internal in nature and result from choices made. He likewise sees the possibilities

to keep developments under societal control decline, and highlights the enormous increase in options and choices citizens face. Equipping individuals better for that complicated task and ensuring their inclusion in the development process are perceived as important tasks of modern governments. From this perspective the welfare state should be remodelled to become a social investment state. American sociologist Ronald Inglehart, has followed a much more empirical approach. On the basis of a series of value surveys conducted in a large group of countries, he concludes to a shift from materialist to post-materialist values. He sees concerns about economic and physical security being replaced increasingly by concerns about the quality of life and opportunities for individual self-expression. Now that the risks of becoming destitute, without income, food, and shelter have been effectively dealt with, there is room for more concerns about what people want out of life. In his most recent book Inglehart characterizes that shift as one from modernization to postmodernization. In his view the process of economic development leads to these two successive trajectories. They imply a transformation of the basic norms governing politics, work, religion, family, and sexual behaviour.

Independent whether authors use the term **post-modern**, **late modern**, or **reflexive modern**, they stress the fact that the great stories - the meta-narratives - of societal progress, of the role of the sovereign nation state, and of the inherent value of observing certain behavioural standards, appear to have lost their appeal. Our societies have become newly unordered; individuals do their own thing and set their own priorities. The **risks** people face have shifted; from a demographic perspective it implies that they have become free to choose whether to have a child and when, whether in or outside marriage, and whether to marry, to cohabit or to remain single.

If this, as I believe, is the background of the new demographic behaviour documented since the mid-sixties, we may draw important conclusions regarding its degree of permanence. And, in my view the present constellation of trends is unlikely to be a mere temporary disturbance. It further allows us to draw a series of conclusions regarding the possible courses of action open to governments wishing to reverse or modify those trends. This because the broad societal changes described also affect the political process and the system of governance. Dutch political scientist Herman van Gunsteren, has pointed out that they have rendered the traditional political and administrative operating system obsolete. The time that administrators and politicians could use an advantage in knowledge and power to find a compromise between the desirable and possible course of action, and subsequently enforce their solution, has passed. Our newly unordered societies are extremely difficult to govern; they play tricks on well meaning administrators. The latter see their initiatives fail, frequently with considerable transaction costs. People appear to have lost faith in their own representative government; the gap between elected officials and the population at large has widened. Attempts to bridge that gap through referenda, hearings, and the like, have not been very successful. A better way forward, so van Gunsteren stipulates, is to move from the traditional operating system based on Analysis and Instruction, to a system based on Diversity and Selection. That is to say, instead of coming up with a >one fits all= solution based on a traditional analysis of problems and options, governments will have to leave room for diversity while selecting which developments should be supported and which should be discouraged. It is easy to see, that making choices presupposes having a clear set of values. Governments will have to learn again how to make timely choices and, by that means, how to fulfill their proper political function.

As far as I can judge, van Gunsteren's assessment is well rooted in current thinking among political scientists of repute even though they may differ in their remedy. I refer to it because of its implications for demographic research and population policies. As I see it, demographic research such as that undertaken by the FFS network will become increasingly important and policy relevant. It will show participating countries the behavioural diversity encountered in their population and, if the results are comparable and become available in a timely fashion, it will give them a picture of the most recent trends. If the country maintains a demographic institute of sorts with well trained analysts, these will be able to give valuable advice on the position of the country in relation to others and on the complexity of the issues involved. That will help governments in making the necessary choices with the least possible delay. Conceivably such organisations could also provide assistance in the selection process itself by analysing the likely repercussions of choices made. If they are not, or are no longer involved in data gathering and analysis, such institutes will soon lose that ability and their edge in knowledge. Consequently, they are bound to lose their usefulness for politicians and policy makers alike.

Ministers who receive policy advice suggesting a simple measure to stimulate people to marry early or to have more children, should sack that advisor or close the institute it comes from. By the same token, any politician or policy maker thinking that there is a single best solution to the present day population problems of European countries, deserves our deepest sympathy. Intervention in the population field may become increasingly necessary. Trying to influence fertility trends may become as inevitable as steering international migration flows. But, the only way forward I can see is to develop suitable instruments through trial and error. Demographers who want to contribute to that do well to follow what goes on in other disciplines. Exiting times await us; I wish I were still young!

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