

Some Reflections on Fertility in Slovenia

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Abstract

In this essay, the author provides a brief historical overview of the fertility debate in Slovenia. Embedded in the nation-building processes since the inception of earliest Slovenian political programme in mid- 19th century, talk about fertility regained an ideologically privileged position following Slovenian independence in 1991. Somewhat paradoxically, though, the issue of demography as an academic endeavour never attracted proportional support from the potential political users. As a consequence, isolated researchers from various 'academic tribes' have dealt with the issue, and it was not until recently that more programmatic efforts have been made to establish inter-disciplinary projects on population issues. This special issue represents such an effort by presenting different theoretical views and approaches, either about the education-fertility link or wider contexts of reproductive behaviour in university educated individuals and couples in Slovenia.

KEYWORDS: fertility, Slovenian attitudes towards demography, interdisciplinary culture

It began in the 1850s

Talking about the fertility of the Slovenian population dates back to mid-19th century, in the context of the pan-European 'national revival'. Slovenian intellectuals, in their efforts to bring to the fore the idea of Slovenia as a political entity of the hitherto dispersed Slovenian speaking population in the Empire's historical lands,¹ also promoted the constitutive topic of 'national struggle' - an euphemism pertaining to the size of national population.² The first 'Slovenian interpretations' of the official statistics on the national populations within the Austro-Hungarian Empire at first occupied mainly scholars from the 'nation-building' disciplines (e.g. historians, archaeologists). They focused on calcu-

¹ The Programme for a United Slovenia was formulated for the first time in March 1848 by Matija Majar, while the most precise formulation was offered by Slovenians from Graz '[...] abolition of historical partition of lands and uniting our Slovenian territory along linguistic borders in a single country, and in this way, to unite all of us in one nation' (Gratzer Zeitung 22 April 1848, in Melik 1995: 68). Such a political entity was envisaged under the auspices of the Austrian Empire.

² According to recalculated data adjusted to the 2002 Census methodology, the present-day territory of Slovenia in 1857 encompassed 1.101.854 Slovenian speakers, and 1.964.036 citizens of Slovenia in 2002 (Slovenia in Figures 2007: 14).

lating the numbers of Slovenian speakers, and unveiling the reasons for their numerical smallness and poor economic circumstances (e.g. Trstenjak 1863; Niederle 1911). Moreover, during the 1920s and 1930s, medical doctors and eugenicists considered the numerical smallness of the Slovenian nation in view of the 'quality of national organism' and 'national health'. Statistics on fertility, mortality, and migration were analysed with regard to various environments and areas settled by Slovenians in order to diagnose and improve the circumstances for the sake of a better 'quality of national posterity'. Of particular concern was the alleged basic biological characteristics of a nation, its persistent 'rebirth and replacement' (e.g. Zalokar 1918).

Scholars in different disciplines have continuously and systematically tracked and evaluated the demographic movements in Slovenia since at least after World War I. Especially in the period of Socialist Yugoslavia,³ talk about fertility was not alarmist in the sense that 'Slovenians are vanishing', but was concentrated more on explanations as to why and when the low fertility rates occurred in Slovenia in comparison with other Yugoslav Republics, and the wider European context (e.g. Šifrer 1963; Vogelnik 1965).

The new demographic awareness since the 1990s

The argument of the 'numerical smallness' was re-activated during the 1990s, in the period of the building of independent Slovenia. An early attempt at formulating a novel fertility policy was a document entitled *Bases for Population Policy in Socialist Republic of Slovenia* written in the anti-Yugoslav pre-war atmosphere in 1990. The *Bases* explicitly addressed 'the irreparable trend of the vanishing Slovenian nation' (*ibid*: 6), proposed 'discouraging the emigration [of highly qualified workforce] and immigration [of unqualified, uneducated and socially marginalised people from other Yugoslav republics]' (p. 9). At the same time, highly welcomed was 'returning Slovenians from abroad' (p. 10). The document, however, was withdrawn from parliamentary discussion before the proclamation of independent Slovenian state in 1991. Since then, the media has constantly reported on the 'endangered national substance' due to low fertility in the country (Knežević Hočevar 2004: 27-29).

In 2004, this concern peaked when the Government, without precedence, put in its *Coalition Treaty* (p. 3)⁴ the effort for the 'improvement of conditions for family building and rise of fertility' among its main goals. The ensuing *Strategy for the fertility rise in the Republic of Slovenia 2006* further elaborated the measures for fertility improvement. Compared to the 1990 document that also touched the selective migration policies in the light of the struggle for the 'national substance', the latter focused exclusively on pronatalist measures. It was particularly emphasised that 'the solution to the problem of undesirable population growth [lies in adopting the] changed, pronounced family norms

³ In chronological order, the Yugoslav states were: the State of Slovenians, Croats and Serbs, established in October 1918; the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, constituted a month later; the Kingdom of Yugoslavia from 1929; the Democratic Federative Yugoslavia from 1945; the Federative Republic of Yugoslavia from 1946, and in 1963 the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia was established.

⁴ The full title is *The Coalition Treaty on Membership in the Government of the Republic of Slovenia in the 2004 – 2008 Mandate*.

and related values' (p. 15). In order to promote values like 'joy of life, the importance of family atmosphere, and the benefit that children bring to the nation', the Government committed itself to systematic, long-term campaign in all spheres of public life (p. 27).

Although the 2006 document was not passed by the Parliament, it seems that 'traditional family values' were gaining utmost importance in ensuing efforts to bring the fertility issue into public discussion. In a recent conference entitled *Slovenian Demographic Challenges of the 21st Century* held in October this year (2007) in Ljubljana,⁵ theologians, mainly the associates of the *Franciscan Family Institute* from Ljubljana,⁶ were offered a special workshop to present their thinking on the family issue.⁷ Moreover, the conference organisers were particularly praised by the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology for having invited 'the experts of family values' to such an important meeting. Corroborating the pro-natalist measures were those contributions that opposed immigration as a temporary solution to low fertility and aging in Slovenia. Particularly exposed were potential 'difficulties and traps' set for the 'natives' (Jakoš 2007a: 33; Merše 2007: 64) and the 'endangered Slovenian culture' (Jakoš 2007b: 35; Malačič 2007: 62).

The appeals to the effect that Slovenians themselves need to solve the negative consequences of low fertility in Slovenia culminated with the intervention of a participant who, in mathematical and informatics view, placed the Slovenian case in the context of calculations of 'population world trends' (e.g. Gams and Krivec 2007; Gams 2007). Although the invited experts on fertility related issues were not representative of 'the state of the art' in Slovenia,⁸ the conference, unfortunately, may well reflect 'the state of the politics' in Slovenia.

State of the art

Despite historically evidenced political interest in the population issue, the scientific interest is not equally supported. In Slovenia, there is a very poor 'institutional tradition' of

⁵ The conference was sponsored by the *Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology*, and was organised within the project *Multi-conference of Information Society* (<http://is.ijs.si>). The main purpose of the project is to bring together scientists and scholars from various research areas into 'information society'.

⁶ The institute is a private institution providing therapeutic help to couples and families in need and educating therapists to help families and couples (More about the institute see: <http://franciskani.rkc.si/fdi/ang/index.html>).

⁷ See contributions by Cvetek (*Stres in travma v družini – pojavnost in nekateri mehanizmi / Stress and Trauma in Family – Appearance and Some Mechanisms*), Gostečnik (*Sakralnost v relacijski družinski paradigmi/ Sacrality in Relational Paradigm of Family*), Osredkar (*Katoliški nauk o zakonu in družini/ Catholic Doctrine about Marriage and Family*), Poljak (*Odgovorno starševstvo/ Responsible Parenthood*), Potočnik (*Nataliteta in religija/ Natality and Religion*) and Repič (*Povezava med zdravim funkcioniranjem v družini in spolno zlorabo otroka/ Relationship Between Healthy Functioning in a Family and Sexual Abuse of a Child*). The full reference to the proceedings is: *Proceedings of the 10th International Multi-conference Information Society (Volume B) Slovenian Demographic Challenges of the 21st Century (2007)*.

⁸ The idea for the conference was launched in June 2007 (see, <http://is.ijs.si>) and held in October 2007. As an unsuspecting a member of organising Committee, I have to mention that over the summer, many invited experts refused to participate at the conference due to the short notice given.

studying population issues. There are no scientific institutes or centres with the explicit programme of systematic investigation of the demographic phenomena, let alone under-graduate or graduate studies or programmes on the issue. Currently, there are isolated or sporadic courses on demography at some faculties at University of Ljubljana.⁹ Only individual scholars from various scientific disciplines work, directly or indirectly, on the issue, and come from such various disciplines as economics, geography, sociology, anthropology, history, ethnology, medicine, and as of recently, theology and even computer sciences.

Moreover, up to the present, only three extensive fertility studies that linked the researchers from different academic disciplines have been conducted in Slovenia. The first was the *World Fertility Survey* conducted in 1976 within Socialist Yugoslavia, but its results and analyses were not published by any population experts in Slovenia. A research project entitled *Sociological, Medical and Demographical Aspects of Low Fertility in Slovenia*, was launched in 1988. Its results were published in Boh 1988, Obersnel Kveder et al. 1993, and Černič Istenič 1994. The last conducted research was *Fertility and Family Survey* in 1994 (Kožuh-Novak et al. 1997; Obersnel Kveder et al. 2001). Until now, interest in the internationally comparable prospective *Generations and Gender Survey* has been expressed only by some researchers employed in different institutions, while no similar interest has been shown by any stakeholder in subsidizing the project.

It should be stressed again that this brief historical outline does not do justice to individual researchers who have devoted, and are devoting their entire professional careers to investigating either general population dynamics, or specific case studies since the mid-19th century.¹⁰ Yet it also must be emphasized that since the independence of Slovenia, there have been few noticeable attempts to assemble such scholars in a common effort to carry out extensive, large-sample multi-disciplinary projects.

The essays presented in this volume are the result of similar undertaking. Inspired by proponents of 'peaceful coexistence' (Greenhalgh 1997: 822) among researchers of various academic disciplines involved in demographic investigations,¹¹ this special issue on fertility among university educated people in Slovenia assembled those researchers who were willing to submit the results of their work in order to better understand their common subject. The contributions that follow range from a statistical cohort analysis based on census data (Šircelj in this issue), a multi-level analysis employing various quantitative and qualitative data sources (Josipovič), an analysis provided by survey data (Stropnik) to pieces based mostly on qualitatively obtained information on the issue (Knežević Hočvar, Cukut, Rajgelj and Černič Istenič). Written from the perspectives of different disciplinary positions, demography, economics, geography, sociology and anthropology, the essays illuminate the many diverse paths in

⁹ Currently, the regular course is *Economic demography* at undergraduate and graduate levels at the *Faculty of Economics*. The only Slovenian university textbook on demography is the 6th edition (2006) of *Demography: Theory, Analysis, Methods, and Models (Demografija: teorija, analiza, metode in modeli)* written by Professor Janez Malačič; the first edition was published in 1993.

¹⁰ Due to limited space in this essay it is impossible to overview each of their efforts and work.

¹¹ I here refer to contributions of Makhlof Obermeyer, Greenhalgh, Fricke, Rao, Kertzner and Knodel that were collected by Carla Makhlof Obermeyer, and published in *Population and Development Review*, 23(4) in 1997.

explaining fertility in a particular segment of population that, according to some calculations, is characterised by statistically evidenced lowest fertility in Slovenia. However, even this 'hard fact' can be questioned once we take into account the various angles of observation, epistemological points of departure, not to mention the methods used.

With these essays, the authors sought to fill the glaringly obvious lack of interdisciplinary work within the Slovenian academia, and poor 'disciplinary cultures'. Finally, this collaborative project supports and reflects an emerging wave of interdisciplinary demographic research which combines the interests and approaches of demographers, anthropologists and other social scientists¹² to highlight the issue in question in concrete national or local settings. To paraphrase renowned historians (Gillis, Tilly, Levine in Kertzer 1997: 842), demography is too important to be left to the researchers from a single academic discipline.

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¹² The book series *New Perspectives on Anthropological and Social Demography* is certainly one among such interdisciplinary projects.

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Povzetek

V pričujočem prispevku avtorica poda kratek zgodovinski oris govora o rodnosti v Sloveniji. Njegove začetke časovno umesti v procese nastajanje slovenske nacije, v obdobje uveljavljanja prvega slovenskega političnega programa v drugi polovici 19. stoletja. Nadalje zatrjuje, da je govor o rodnosti ponovno pridobil ideološko privilegiran položaj v obdobju razglasitve neodvisnosti Slovenije leta 1991. Hkrati pa pokaže, da demografija kot znanstveno delovanje, ni nikoli pridobila sorazmerne podpore s strani potencialnih političnih uporabnikov. Posledično so se z demografskimi vprašanji ukvarjali le posamični raziskovalci z različnih 'akademskih plemen'. Šele nedavno lahko identificiramo večja prizadevanja po oblikovanju med-disciplinarnih projektov o prebivalstvenih vprašanjih. Pričujoča posebna številka revije je že eno takih prizadevanj. Je zbir različnih teoretičnih presoj in pristopov bodisi o povezavi med izobrazbo in rodnostjo bodisi o širših kontekstih rodnostnega vedenja univerzitetno izobraženih posameznikov ali parov v Sloveniji.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: rodnost, odnos do demografije v Sloveniji, več-disciplinarna kultura