

Inaugural Conference of the Laboratory of Historical Demography
of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research

The Persistence of the Past:
Connecting fertility and family patterns of the past to the present

Rostock, 25-27 May 2009

Call for papers

Overview

Our understanding of contemporary demography can be enhanced by taking both geography and history more explicitly into account. This workshop aims to identify a basis for taking a new and rigorous approach to assessing the imprint of the past on present fertility and family patterns. We invite papers on Europe and beyond that explore (i) the continuation or disappearance of historic patterns of family formation, household structure, and fertility (ii) the divergence and convergence of demographic behavior (iii.) the role of initial conditions and path dependency in demographic processes and institutions (iv) issues in the time scale of historical processes, (v) issues of geographic scale and methods of historical spatial analysis.

Extended description

The past, the present and the future exist along a continuum of change. In order to understand the present and to anticipate (if possible) the future, we must examine the past. While some dimensions of Europe's demography are converging others remain surprisingly diverse. Moreover, the origins of regional and local diversity often lie well back in the past. In particular, patterns of fertility and family life in Europe today are a mixture of innovation and tradition. Possibly the most famous feature of Europe's historical demography is the distinction between a late-marrying, late-reproducing, West and an East in which marriage and childbearing were both young. Does the increase of late childbearing and voluntary childlessness in the West, in contrast with the persistence of young and quasi-universal motherhood in the East, indicate that Europe is returning to the centuries-old division? Or do trends in Eastern Europe reflect a more recent history – that of 75 years of Communism? A further division of Europe that has been postulated is that between a “strong” family system in the Mediterranean and a “weak” family in the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries. Today some scholars hypothesize that the late departure from the parental home, low rates of cohabitation and low fertility that characterize Southern Europe are linked to the “strong” family tradition. Does regional variation within “strong” countries support this hypothesis? Or do current economic conditions provide a sufficient explanation? For centuries religion has also divided Europe, with clear distinctions between Catholic and Protestant demographic behaviour in many societies. Even though religious observance is at an all-time low, do these traditional divides still resonate in post-Christian Europe?

In order to get to grips with such issues, there is considerable scope for improving our understanding of contemporary demography by taking both geography and history more explicitly into account. This can be regarded as composed of two elements: a) To enhance our understanding of the connections between past and contemporary demographic patterns. b) To identify promising strategies for further research on this topic.

The papers presented at the workshop shall cover a wide range of phenomena and populations within the broad field of family and fertility. Numerous topics immediately spring to mind: variation in welfare regimes, gender roles, economic systems, family structure, multi-generational coresidence, and the roles of young adults are all prime candidates for study within a wider historical perspective. We hope that, whatever the specific topic they study, participants will feel able to address some of the following concepts and questions.

1. Time scale and focus.

Which past is the most relevant? We can investigate population trends in many European countries for 150 years or more from official statistics, and in some we can go back much further. Almost all demographic phenomena saw significant changes within the span of available data. So how do we know which dimensions of the demographic past are most relevant today? We can also link demographic indices to many economic, social and cultural dimensions of past populations. Again, how do we know which matters most?

2. Level of aggregation

Individual demographic behaviour is embedded within a series of contexts: the family, the community, the region, and the state. How do we decide which level of aggregation is the most significant? How important are spatial effects? Do regional or local trends enable us to examine more “natural experiments” than is feasible when only national data are used?

3. Data continuity

A wealth of diverse data exist for European populations; in addition to censuses and national vital registration there are church records, tax records and many more potential sources. However, many sources have unique characteristics and often relate only to limited populations. How do we integrate the insights from such diverse materials into a continuous whole? How can we best exploit the potential of large-scale individual-level data sets for historical populations that are becoming available?

4. Convergence

Some processes are clearly converging in Europe today, but, equally clearly, others are not. Can a better historical and geographical understanding throw new light on current convergence? Are we seeing the emergence of multiple equilibria? What role do long-standing cultural and regional differences play in shaping convergence?

5. Initial conditions

Some features of European societies seem to be as old as the demographic records themselves; the famous division of European marriage and co-residence patterns identified by John Hajnal, for example. How relevant are such long-standing patterns? Do the traditional demographic regimes have anything to tell us about contemporary society?

6. Path dependency

In recent decades scholars looking to understand family and fertility life have paid considerable attention to the various “welfare regimes” to be found in Europe. What insights do we gain from considering such relationships in the context of path dependency? What other institutions and cultural features of European societies can be examined in this way?

7. Punctuated equilibria

Demographic change is usually relatively slow, evolutionary rather than revolutionary. However, at times (e.g. in the post-Communist states after 1989/1991) there can be extremely rapid changes from one demographic regime to another. Can the historical record throw light on such transformations and how new demographic systems come into being?

Submission:

One page abstract to be submitted as of December 1st 2008

Proposals can be sent to Birgit Moeller, Secretary of the Laboratory of Historical Demography (moeller@demogr.mpg.de).

Time and Venue

25-27 May 2009, MPIDR, Konrad Zuse str. 1 Rostock , Germany

Financial Support:

Travel expenses and hotel accommodation for speakers will be paid by the MPIDR