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The Gender Revolution and the Second Demographic Transition: Understanding Recent Family Trends in Industrialized Societies

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares the determinants and consequences of recent family trends in industrialized societies provided by narratives associated with the second demographic transition (SDT) and the gender revolution in the public and private spheres. It examines differences in theoretical foundations and implications for the future, centering on how each views the importance of gender and intergenerational relationships in people's lives. The SDT is based on an ideational theoretical foundation while the gender revolution is based on structural changes in gender relationships. The SDT predicts continued below replacement fertility and union instability while the gender revolution predicts stronger families with more children. The SDT considers family ties to be much less important than does the gender revolution. Although the family trends underlying these two approaches are ongoing, and a convincing view of the phenomenon as a whole has not yet emerged clearly, the gender approach seems to be the more fruitful one.

Introduction

For the past three or four decades, the industrialized countries have been in the midst of a process of family change often called the "Second Demographic Transition" (Lesthaeghe 2010), or the SDT. The characteristics of this process that are the most interesting to demographers include dramatically reduced fertility, delayed marriage and childbearing, and great increases in nonmarital cohabitation, union instability, and births out of wedlock (Lesthaeghe 2010), sometimes linked with rising rates of female labor force participation. Technical demographers investigate the extent to which lower fertility has resulted simply from delay, which is eventually recuperated later in the life course, and how much appears to be permanent for current cohorts (Goldstein, Sobotka, & Jasillioniene 2010).

Researchers have found the SDT to be a useful shorthand to refer to this complex of trends, but there is little consensus on what the determinants and consequences of these trends might be, or on how general they are. Cliquet (1992) sees these changes simply as a continuation of the (first) "Demographic Transition" (DT), which was characterized by dramatic declines in fertility and mortality; Coleman (2004) agrees, and also points out a number of potential inconsistencies, including the possibility that the SDT is not general in the sense that the DT has proved to be, but rather a primarily European phenomenon.

It is not unusual that such disagreements exist; rather, I am surprised that there have been so few. The view from the "middle" of any major demographic change is never clear. One does not know where it is going, how long it will last, or whether it will reverse, much less what had been causing it. Will it lead to disaster, a new equilibrium, or something else?

This was certainly the case with the DT, the major cause of which was assumed for a long time to be physiological. Some argued that recent social and economic changes, such as urban living or female education, was sapping mankind's "vital forces." Although there is still not total agreement about the relative impacts of economic development and family planning technologies in some countries, the physiological explanation, at least, was finally ruled out, although not until the 1920s (Pearl 1939).

Similarly, the post-World War II "baby boom," perhaps most dramatic in the United States, was equally puzzling. Moderate term projections for the US population made prior to the baby boom (e.g., 1940) were dramatically, even laughably, lower than those made 15 years later, which in turn were laughably higher than those of the 1980s. In between, theories were developed predicting that such oscillations would continue in the demographic future (Easterlin 1978). As the next peak was expected in 1984 (Easterlin 1978), this prediction was clearly not realized, although some have tried to account for the delay (Macunavich 1988).

Although it may take many more years before we have clarity on what the causes and consequences of the SDT really are, I think it is time to assess alternative explanations and likely trajectories, if only because the implications of the SDT narrative are so problematic. Theoretically, the SDT envisions family relationships to have become dramatically subsidiary to individualistic concerns, as people pursue their "higher order needs" (Lesthaeghe 2010; Maslow 1954), with continued below-replacement fertility. It is my view, however, that most of the characteristic trends embodied in the SDT are the result of a structural shift of relationships between men and women, as yet incomplete, which has led to a situation of considerable confusion about what men and women expect from each other. This reduces couples' willingness to commit, particularly their willingness to undertake perhaps the biggest commitment, which is having children. This view, that the gender revolution will eventually "complete," and in several

countries is well underway, provides the basis for considerably more optimism about the future of family relationships in industrialized countries. In this paper, I undertake such an assessment.

The Gender Revolution

The gender revolution is producing shifts that in many ways continue the changes initiated by the industrial revolution (and in that sense, are a continuation of the processes underlying the 1stDT), although I agree with Lesthaeghe that its dynamics are totally different. The DT focused nearly entirely on intergenerational family patterns, as couples reduced their fertility in reaction, in part, to declining mortality, and in part to the changing economic relationships between the generations. Children became relatively much more expensive, with the extension of education, while they also became much less necessary to their parents, either as useful labor as children or as partners and inheritors, as the role of family farms and businesses in the economy dwindled.

The gender revolution, in contrast, focuses on the family's gender relationships rather than intergenerational relationships. The seeds of the gender revolution were planted by the industrial revolution, but its results have only been emerging seriously over the past 50 or so years in most industrialized countries. It is a revolution with two parts, reflecting the ways the industrial revolution reshaped society and the relationships between the genders.

The early industrial revolution essentially created two spheres of human activity, the public and the private, as the dominant agricultural subsistence family economy broke down with urbanization and the growth of industry and commerce. The public sphere encompasses the non-family activities of paid work outside the home in factories and offices, as well as investment activities such as politics and education, and from the beginning, at least among the countries earliest to industrialize, the public sphere was dominated by men. The private sphere is the realm of the home and family, which were increasingly left to women, as first, men withdrew to more productive activities outside the home, and then children withdrew into a life dominated from an

early age by educational institutions. Thus the first part of what I am calling here the gender revolution¹ occurred when technological changes led women to emerge out of the household economy into the public sphere. They undertook new roles that provided more support to their families than they could provide in their domestic roles, much as technological change brought men out of the agricultural household economy a century earlier for the same reasons.

The gender revolution is an extension of the DT in another way, as well. There was a massive restructuring of adult lives, particularly women's, resulting from the declines in fertility and mortality. The declines in fertility and mortality re-shaped the female life course because, with smaller families and longer lives, caring for the young could no longer be a life-long, full-time career for them, as it had always been until at well into the 20th century (Jacobson 1964).

In the primarily agricultural economy of the United States in the middle of the 19th century, lives were relatively short. Although about half of the gain in life expectancy since then was due to the near-eradication of infant and early child mortality, half was not (Jacobson 1964, Fig. 1). When 19th century women married at about age 24 and bore five to seven children over the next ten to twenty years (not all of whom, of course, survived), they would have children living at home until they were close to 60 years of age, by which time they were normally widowed and not in good health, themselves. Their adult years *were* their childbearing and raising years. By the peak of the baby boom 100 years later, however, when young adults married and had children at very young ages, structuring a life around home and family no longer fit the years the decline in mortality had given to them (Watkins, Menken, and Bongaarts 1987). If women married at age 20, as they did in the early 1950s, and quickly had two to three children,

¹ It was also a gender revolution when men first left agriculture, and near continuous, face-to-face interaction with their wives and children, leaving women to assume many of their tasks. However, little research has been done focusing on this transition. What is clear is that there was much less criticism of men when chopping wood and hauling water were replaced by the new technologies of central heat and inside plumbing, compared with what there was when women gave up making clothes and soup except as a hobby.

when their last child left home they were still in their early 40s, yet they could expect to live another 30 or more years.

This new demographic reality, then, facilitated women's move into the public sphere. Although the major analyses of the early growth of female labor force participation suggest that economic changes that created increasing demand for women's paid labor drove the growth in female labor force participation (Oppenheimer 1973 and Goldin 1992 for the US; Durand, 1975 for a comparative analysis), the ways demographic changes had reshaped women's lives made them more willing to accept this new demand. Women's move into the public sphere was certainly multiply determined. It also had, however, multiple repercussions on family life.

The first half of the gender revolution, the dramatic rise in labor force participation among women (including the mothers of small children), was seen, and to at least some extent *was*, a weakening of the family. Women had added economic support responsibilities to their family responsibilities, with little relief from the latter, putting pressure on them to compromise by reducing their fertility. There is ample evidence that throughout the early years of the growth in female labor force participation, employed women had fewer children than women who were not employed, and women who had career plans expected to have fewer children than those who did not (Waite & Stolzenberg 1976).

There is also evidence, although weaker, that marriages in which the woman was employed were less stable than those in which she was not (see the review in Sayer and Bianchi 2000). Certainly, states with higher levels of female labor force participation have had higher levels of divorce over the past 100 years or so, although the causal arrow in this case, as in most of the other studies, is not clear (Ruggles 1997). Nevertheless, the massive rise in divorce

paralleled the growth in female labor force participation.² Further, the “husband breadwinner, wife caregiver” model was under pressure as the emergence of these new life course territories meant that husbands and wives spend fewer and fewer of their joint years as the parents of dependent children. Whatever the reasons, however, the rise in divorce, together with the concomitant increase in approval for non-marital sexual relationships (Thornton, Young-de Marco 2000), has led both men and women to resist commitment, and hence, to the massive increases in out-of-wedlock childbearing and cohabitation, key characteristics of the SDT.

The SDT and the Gender Revolution, Compared

These two narratives, the SDT and the gender revolution, attempt to account for pretty much the same set of facts. They differ strongly, however, in their approach to explanation, their view of the future, and their understanding of the meaning of family relationships in adults’ lives. In this section, I attempt to draw out these contrasts.

Theoretical Differences

In Lesthaeghe’s (2010) review (in which he cites his earlier statements with various co-authors going back to 1986), he puts forward the argument that theoretically, the SDT is responding to the development of new values, and is hence not rooted in structural conditions, beyond relative affluence. These new values are instead independent drivers of individual behavior. Lesthaeghe’s narrative thus joins Thornton’s “developmental idealism” (Thornton 2001) and Hakim’s “preference theory” (2001) by privileging ideation over changing structural conditions as explanations for important human behaviors, despite the powerful and ongoing structural changes underway in the relationships between the genders.

² The rise in divorce was at least in part the result of the great loosening of laws restricting divorce. It is not clear what a ‘natural’ level of divorce might be. William Goode (1990) has posited a curvilinear pattern, with high levels in the pre-industrial period, followed by lower levels that were institutionalized by civil and religious forces seeking to stabilize the family; the recent period may simply be reverting to the older pattern.

I have difficulty with theories that privilege attitudes and ideas as major shapers of behavior, given how rapidly attitudes on family issues have been changing (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2000). I view the gender revolution as thoroughly structural, so that undergoing the changes implied by the second half of the gender revolution should at least partially "solve" the problems that have led to the more problematic elements of SDT behavior. As I will review below, with the completion of the gender revolution, the world is likely to experience close-to-replacement fertility and greater family stability.

Future Trajectories

From its first articulation, the architects of SDT narrative have taken a very negative view of the future consequences for families and populations; they appear to consider the behaviors linked with the SDT, particularly lowest-low fertility, to be permanent. Lesthaeghe describes these consequences at great length in his recent review (2010) of his own and related studies, including those of some of his critics. On the basis of this review, he rejects the optimistic view that the future families and populations of the world would achieve a "new balance" (i.e., zero population growth) based on low mortality and a matching level of replacement fertility. He expects much lower fertility and uncommitted relationships for the foreseeable future because "greater economic development . . . [increases] . . . a focus on non-material needs (freedom of expression, participation and emancipation, self-realization and autonomy, recognition)" relative to "material, subsistence needs such as shelter, and physical and economic security" (Lesthaeghe 2010, p. 213).

In contrast, our understanding of the gender revolution sees many of the iconic SDT trends to be transitional. They are the consequences of the enormous destabilization in the relationships between the sexes caused by the first half of the gender revolution. This is

particularly the case for the very low levels of fertility and very high levels of union dissolution. And these are very important phenomena, because very low fertility challenges the survival of rich cultures, and eventually, the future of the human race; high levels of union dissolution disrupt the lives of all involved: the couples who have invested in each other and the children whose growth and security are undermined, although in many countries public policy does much to protect the children, and could do much more. Stabilizing fertility and unions is important.

Some of the other trends that are frequently included as indicators, however, such as the growth of cohabitation and unmarried childbearing, and the delay in union formation and parenthood, are of a very different order. Replacing legal/religious ceremonies with socially recognized "couple status", which is what happens when such unions endure past a relatively brief period, is not a problem, and it is not clear why there has been such denial of this issue. Marriages, too, can be unstable; those in the US are as nearly as unstable as cohabiting unions in many parts of Europe (Heuveline, Timberlake, and Furstenberg 2003; Kennedy and Thomson 2010). Childbearing and raising within such unions are also not problems, if children are born into relatively stable cohabiting unions, which is also increasingly the case in northern and western Europe (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). And I've never been terribly unhappy about the massive delays of parenthood that so concern Lesthaeghe and many other, primarily male demographers. In the new, longer life course brought to young adults by the DT, there is plenty of time to have two children. Young people do not have to become parents while they are still in the throes of "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2007). Young men and women need time to establish mature relationships, develop solid job or career trajectories, and (pace Maslow), establish their own independent identities. But as I said, there is time. Young adults can wait into their early or even mid-thirties to begin families (although if they want to support their children well into

adulthood and still experience a rewarding retirement and grandparental stage, neither men nor women should wait much longer).

The Role of Family in Adult Lives

Another difference between these two narratives, although Lesthaeghe never makes this argument explicitly, is that he feels that adults' having rewarding relationships with partners and children should not be considered among individuals' "higher order needs." Instead, he seems to suggest, they are part of the "solidarity and social group adherence and cohesion" (p. 213), too much of which will be sacrificed to individualism. The importance of partnership and parenthood would seem to be the critical issue in any approach to the family changes that the SDT narrative addresses. Lesthaeghe may be accurately describing the current ideal male life course, which is focused so totally on work and idealizes the freedom to have multiple, short-term relationships, but few women, and I would bet, nearly as few men, would agree.

Other men writing on this issue often take an even stronger position, and express amazement that modern individuals would ever have children at all, and might feel equally averse to conjugal relationships that might involve them in their care. Coleman discusses parenthood only in terms of "duty", as well as "cost and inconvenience"; and "20 years of partial house arrest" (2004, p. 18). Although it seems likely that he is being ironic at this point, he is far from alone among those discussing the SDT in assuming that any benefits to parenthood, as well as the costs, would accrue only to women (McDonald 2010; Romaniuk 2010). (Most, like Lesthaeghe, avoid the subject altogether.) Even scholars who express enthusiasm about changes that support families, as a way of encouraging fertility, focus only on public policies, and rarely, if ever, mention the ways husbands and fathers might share in the care of their homes and children (Hoem 2004; McDonald 2000; Romaniuk 2010).

The Second Half of the Gender Revolution

That the ongoing gender revolution might change the trajectory of SDT trends is a strong claim, and it is difficult, of course, to be definitive, as the issues are really empirical. The second half of the gender revolution is just barely underway, relatively speaking. Put simply, it requires most men and women to integrate their work and family lives, sharing in the financial support of their families as well as in the tasks of making a home and raising children. Such fundamental change is unlikely to be instantaneous.

Despite the rapid growth in female labor force participation during the 1960s and 1970s, men's roles did not really need to change during that period. Women were responding to new opportunities, adding new roles even as their commitment to home care remained; most working women were proud that they were able to do both. After all, in the "ideal" nuclear family of male breadwinners and female care givers under low fertility and mortality conditions, it is likely that many women were "underemployed," at least by the time children reached school age. (I have often wondered whether the growth in "home schooling" in the United States among culturally conservative groups is in part a response to these changes in women's lives.) Women's labor force participation remained 'counter-cyclical' during those decades, and strongly influenced by family considerations, decreasing with the addition of children and increasing in response to lower husband's wages (Leibowitz & Klerman 1995).

As attitudes developed during the 1980s and 1990s that redefined women's roles to include earning as a central part, however, rather than an 'add-on' (Goldscheider & Kaufman 2006; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), women's labor force participation became increasingly responsive to their own characteristics and less to those of their immediate families (Leibowitz and Klerman 1995). This has led to pro-cyclical patterns of female labor force participation, as women dampened their responsiveness to their family situations and responded

to greater opportunity by increased work effort, so that a major contributor to the growth in inequality in developed countries has been the emergence of families with two high earning (or two low earning) partners (Karoly and Burtless 1995). Young men expect their wives to work; a partner with a low earnings outlook is more undesirable to men than one of a different race or religion, a much older age, or even existing children (Goldscheider and Kaufman 2006).

As a result, pressure has begun to increase on men to contribute more to the well-being of their families by adding family care to their core adult roles. This pressure has been exacerbated by structural changes in the world economy, as globalization increased uncertainty in the labor market and increased as well the need for couples to have two incomes in case one failed (Duvander 1999).

There is, of course, major resistance, at many levels, to making progress on this second half of the gender revolution. Structural constraints on the job pose great challenges to men's increasing their familial engagement (Gerson 2010; Hochschild 2000) in many countries (the United States is notorious for the long hours workers must put in). There may also be some lingering gate-keeping by their partners, particularly with regard to child care (Hofferth and Pleck 2008) and perhaps housecleaning in Germany (Cooke 2006).

Nevertheless, younger men's attitudes have become much more accepting (Gerson 2010), and there is much evidence that men's family roles have begun to intensify. By the end of the 20th century in the US, fathers spent 5 more hours per week with their children than they had 20 years earlier (Bianchi, Robinson & Milkie 2006). In addition, fathers' proportion of total parental time spent on child care surpassed 40 percent (Bond, Galinsky & Swanberg 1998). One study in the US found that while fathers were responsible for 40 percent of child care during the week, they took on fully 47 percent on weekends (Yeung, et al. 2001). Further, there is evidence that this expansion is slowly having positive effects, increasing fertility and reducing union instability.

Gender Equality, Childbearing and Union Dissolution

There is increasing evidence that increased male involvement in home making and childcare has the potential for increasing fertility, both in countries with "lowest-low" fertility such as Italy (Pinnelli and Fiori 2006) and countries that provide major support for families from the state and employers (normally mandated by the state), such as Sweden (Goldscheider and Bernhardt 2011). The gender equality-fertility link has been increasingly widely studied, both in individual countries and comparatively (for recent reviews, cf. Goldscheider and Bernhardt 2011; Goldscheider, Oláh, and Puur, 2010; Neyer, Lappegord, Vignoli, Rieck, and Muresan 2010).

There is also increasing evidence that men's engagement in the home stabilizes unions. Demographers and their intellectual cousins, economists and structural sociologists, have largely ignored the possibility that there may be link between gender equality and union stability, in part because they are so convinced that the relationship is the reverse. And in many countries and at many times, they were likely right. During the first half of the gender revolution, it was married women's entry into the labor force that appeared to be destabilizing gender relationships, because women's new independence allowed them to leave difficult marriages (Johnson & Skinner 1986; Ruggles 1997).

As the relationship between female labor force participation (gender equity in the public sphere) and fertility appears to have reversed, however, it is likely that this should also be the case for the relationship between women's labor force participation (if it comes with gender equity in the private sphere) and union dissolution, as well. In each case, what appears to be happening is that the first half of the gender revolution, the 'anti-family' half, is giving way to the second half, the 'pro-family' half (Goldscheider and Waite 1991).

Interestingly, family sociologists and psychologists, together with related scholars, have long known that men's involvement with domestic tasks increased women's happiness (e.g., Cox

& Paley 2003). A few economists and demographers are starting to take notice, as well. Sigle-Rushton (2010) re-examines the studies by economists, starting with Becker (1977), and finds that, at least in the United Kingdom, fathers' home production stabilizes marriage regardless of mothers' employment status. Olah and Gähler (2012, this conference) also find that couples in Sweden in which the male partner participates more in domestic tasks are less likely to separate. This result, however, may depend on context, as another study finds that while this pattern also appears in the US, male participation appears to increase union dissolution in Germany, suggesting that the balance between the increased strains on men and relief for women might tip in the other direction in situations in which few men participate in their homes (Cooke 2006).

Another recent paper analyzes US data (the NSFH) to show that men's concerns about the stability of their unions reduces their involvement with their children, while, controlling for measures of union quality, men's greater involvement with their children reduces the likelihood of union dissolution (Spearin and Goldscheider 2010). It makes an essentially economic argument, without invoking the impact on the children's mothers' union satisfaction. Given the vast asymmetry in child custody in western, industrialized societies, men with concerns about the stability of their unions have an incentive to disinvest in their relationships with their children, who are likely to become a smaller, and less rewarding part of their lives, while men with strong relationships with their children will be less willing to leave them, whatever their relationships with the children's mothers. So increasingly, studies seem to be showing that families might become stronger, not weaker, in the second half of the gender revolution.

Concluding Discussion

This paper has compared the approach to the family-demographic phenomena of what is called the SDT taken by the chief theorists of the SDT (Lesthaeghe and colleagues), with an

approach focused on the gender revolution. The approach based on the SDT narrative identifies changes in ideation as the principle cause of the SDT, specifically the development of individualism and other "higher order needs," predicts continued low fertility and high union dissolution, and treats the central family relationships of partnership and parenthood as relatively unimportant in adult lives. The approach based on the gender revolution identifies changes in women's roles in the public sphere (employment), i.e., the "first half" of the gender revolution, to be disrupting gender relationships and hence contributing to these negative trends in fertility and union stability. This approach, however, implies that increases in men's involvement in the home, the "second half" of the gender revolution, have the promise of increasing fertility and union stability. Further, there is evidence in support of this claim.

As the argument makes clear, however, this is an ongoing process of social change, and demography (like other social sciences) does not have a good track record in understanding ongoing demographic changes, whether based on our experience with trying to understand the (first) Demographic Transition in its early decades or the baby boom. The "optimistic" argument rests on a privileging of structural explanation over an ideational one and in expecting that the central family relationships of committed couple-ness and parenthood (and eventual grandparenthood) will continue to be important in adults' lives, even in a world of accessible short-term sexual relationships and excellent birth control. It is based on an assessment that modern adults will continue to seek these relationships, even if it means accepting different roles from those they grew up to expect.

Certainly, change has not been instantaneous. The gender revolution is characterized as "incomplete" (Esping-Anderson 2009), as "unfinished" (Gerson 2010), and sometimes even as "stalled" (too many to cite). I have even expressed worries, myself, that a world of independent living for young adults might compete successfully against the stresses of working through

changing gender roles (Goldscheider and Waite 1991). However, as each new cohort sees the possibilities of a "new balance" in family roles, whether by seeing their parents sharing, or by sharing work places with women, and with men whose wives and mothers worked, these stresses should wane. And of course, as Malthus himself posited: "the **passion** between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state." We rejected this postulate vis-à-vis fertility long ago, but it may be more persuasive in the context of couple relationships.

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