

A Dying Creed?: The Demographic Contradictions of Liberal Capitalism

This paper aims to test the thesis that the population of the developed world will become increasingly religious and conservative in the long-term, reversing decades - even centuries - of liberal secularisation. Not only will strongly religious populations grow, but their growth will undermine the very foundations of Enlightenment modernity. There will be no mass conversions or sudden shifts in the western *weltanschauung*. Instead, an antimodern religiosity will spread largely through demographic advantage. An analogy may be drawn with early Christianity, which grew from some 40 converts in 30 C.E. to over 6 million adherents in 300 C.E. Religious sociologist Rodney Stark claims that an important component of this growth came from Christians' mortality advantage over pagans. This allowed Christians to maintain a population growth rate of 40 percent per decade. Coincidentally, the Mormon church in the United States has managed to grow - through higher fertility rather than lower mortality - at the 40 percent rate for the past century, thus retaining its 70 percent share of Utah's population in the face of large-scale non-Mormon in-migration. (Stark 1997) A similar dynamic enabled the descendants of 5-10,000 17th century French settlers to expand to over 8 million French-Canadians and thereby retain their demographic position in the face of rapid British immigration in the 1815-1930 period.

Contemporary Relevance and Current Research

Ideological and Social-Theoretical Implications

This thesis suggests that demographically-mediated cultural contradictions will displace class contradictions as the principal challenge to liberal-capitalist modernity. For Marx, the contradictions between capital's need for labour to create value and the falling rate of profit (as capital accumulated) leads to a collapse of the capitalist system. (Marx [1887] 1999) By contrast, Daniel Bell sees a 'cultural contradiction' between liberal capitalism's individualistic cultural ethic and its Calvinist production imperatives. In contrast to Marx, however, no mechanism is postulated for the collapse of the system other than a vague fragmentation or moral decay. (Bell [1976] 1996) Culturalists like Bell or Hegel hold that ideas like Islam or the scientific method conquer directly through persuasion and conversion. But 'assimilation' of ideas is only one possible vector for their spread. Demographic advantage can spread an idea like Christianity even in the absence of any large-scale 'assimilation' of outsiders.

The Role of Demography

Demography has not been absent as a concern among sociologists and historians, but the discrediting of the Malthusian hypothesis has led to a considerable neglect of this aspect of human development. (Dallas 2000) Demography was long seen as the handmaiden of technological change. The demic expansion of Bantu populations from West Africa into Southern Africa, or the geographic expansion of Steppe and European peoples to the south and west are cited as examples. (Cavalli-Sforza 1994; Diamond 1998) Recent scholarship in historical demography, however, stresses that fertility was an independent demographic variable even before 1800. (Tilly 1978; Wrigley & Schofield 1989)

In an age of declining mortality, fertility (along with migration) is becoming an increasingly important inter-group demographic determinant. Furthermore, in our modern age of democratisation and state reflexivity (ie. population demarcation), demographic changes are more likely to be politicised than previously. In short, one's group needs to 'win' the census to take power. (Horowitz 1985) In Bosnia, Lebanon, Kosovo, Israel/Palestine, India, Northern Ireland and Fiji, to take just a few cases, demographic dynamics have been linked to violent ethnic conflict. (Toft 2002; Slack and Doyon 2001) Indeed, one need look no further than the large cities of the West to see the impact that inter-ethnic fertility differences and immigration have had on the cultural and political landscape. (Kennedy and Connelly 1994; Weiner and Teitelbaum 2001) The fertility of non-Europeans is rapidly converging with that of Europe, however the same cannot be said for the fertility of the religious. Given the capacity of ethnic 'others' to change the complexion of the West, is it not plausible to presume that the religiously committed can similarly transform society and politics through demographic advantage?

The Decline of the Great Economic Questions

One of the key reasons for the growing importance of demography as an engine of history and ideology is that the economic goalposts have been narrowing throughout the twentieth century rendering culture (linked to fertility differences) more important. Books like Arthur Schlesinger's *The Vital Center* (1949), Daniel Bell's *End of Ideology* (1960), Francis Fukuyama's *End of History and the Last Man* (1992) or Anthony Giddens *The Third Way* (1998) all speak to a common theme. Namely the exhaustion of chiliastic hopes and grand economic ideologies and a growing recognition by all political parties that economic problems can only be solved by some difference-splitting between state socialism and the free market. Modern macroeconomics has also helped mitigate the worst excesses of cyclical instability, and a new synthesis of monetarist and fiscal policy has emerged. In essence, the great economic questions have been largely reduced to questions of incrementalism and technocratic management.

The Emerging Cultural Divide: Liberals and Traditionalists

The great economic battles between capitalists and socialists have been fought to a stalemate, so culture becomes more important. Samuel Huntington, noting the fading of the Cold War and the upsurge of political Islam, places cultural conflict between civilisations at the centre of his paradigm. (Huntington 1996) Cultural attitudes have shifted in a liberal direction since the 1960s in the West, a trend documented in successive values surveys. (Inglehart 1990; Mayer 1992) This cultural liberalisation process has also fed a rapid secularisation of European society through cultural and structural differentiation. In addition, religion has had its functions usurped by the state and its credibility undermined by scientists. (Bruce 2002)

On the other hand, there are interesting countercurrents at play. In the United States, the religiosity of the population has been stable for almost forty years, despite 1990s increases in the unchurched population. (Hout and Fischer 2002) In Europe - especially England - church attendance has been plummeting. (Brierley 2000) Yet, even in Europe, 'newer' Protestant sects, while small, have experienced growth in the midst of rapid religious decline while Islam has remained an important focal point for European-born Muslims. Steve Bruce acknowledges exceptions to his secularisation

thesis, and suggests that in societies where liberalism is not entrenched, his thesis may not apply. But liberalism and secularisation are also linked *within* western societies. Recent research confirms the relationship between religiosity and conservatism. (Norris & Inglehart 2004) This emerged strongly in the 2000 and 2004 US elections, when weekly religious attenders supported Bush 2-1 while non-attenders supported Clinton or Kerry by a similar margin. Likewise, white evangelical Protestants voted 78 percent for Bush while secular Americans voted 67 percent for Kerry. An influential Pew Forum survey based on regression analysis of 2004 election survey data shows that church attendance is now tied with race as the most significant predictor of American voting behaviour. Economic issues rank well behind. (Church Central 2003; Pew 2005: 5,11)

Demography: the Achilles Heel of Liberalism

This paper will suggest that demography provides the missing mechanism by which liberal-capitalist democracies (and hence Fukuyama's 'end of history') may fail. The European-origin populations which expanded in the 1750-1900 period due to superior technology and lower mortality went into relative decline during the twentieth century due to declining fertility. As a result, Europe's share of world population cascaded from 26 percent of the world total in 1900 to 12 percent in 2000 and is papered to reach just 6 percent of the total in 2050. This means that Europeans will form a global minority with the same demographic presence as non-whites currently possess in Britain today.

Europe's population has now peaked and will begin to decline unless augmented by a politically impossible rate of immigration. Total fertility rates in Europe have been below replacement for over thirty years (currently at around 1.3-1.5) but the momentum of the post-war baby boom has ensured a comfortable period of slowing population growth. This demographic cushion is now over. The slide will begin in the current 2000-2005 period with a loss of some 650,000 people per year, increasing to an annual loss of 3 million per annum by 2050. The rest of the world appears to be following suit: total fertility rates in the *developing* world stood at 6.16 children per woman in 1950, but remain at just 2.92 today and are in free fall. UN demographers now predict that current trends will see world fertility fall below the replacement level to just 1.85 children per woman. (Wattenberg 2004)

In short, humanity has entered a period of profound demographic change. Two recent best-selling books, Ben Wattenberg's *Fewer* (2002) and Philip Longman's *Empty Cradle* (2004) highlight some of the earth-shattering policy implications of declining fertility. Putting to one side the authors' unduly pro-growth agenda, it remains the case that population decline has the potential to become a major global issue. More important for our study is the link between religiosity and fertility, noted by Longman and a number of academic writers. (Simons 1980) One study of religiosity and fertility in 13 Catholic OECD countries suggests that religiosity is increasingly important as a determinant of fertility. Moreover, conservative denominations tend to have high fertility rates. (Adsera 2003, 2004) In the United States, conservative Protestants have fertility rates higher than those of liberal denominations and roughly twice that of secular Americans. Demographic advantages based on fertility account for 76 percent of the growth of the evangelical Protestant population since 1972 and help to explain the stalling of theological liberalism during the past few decades. (Roof & McKinney 1987; Hout et al. 2001) One could argue that the current demographic transition is leading to an evolutionary process whereby

religious communities that reject the modern ethos are among the only demographically growing islands in a sea of below replacement fertility.

Among Catholics in Europe and the United States, recent research shows that while Protestant and Catholic fertility has converged, religiosity within these denominations increasingly affects fertility. For Alicia Adsera, in Spain, 'in the context of lower church participation, religiosity has acquired a more relevant meaning for demographic behavior.' (Adsera 2004) The other context is that of below-replacement fertility. The so-called 'second demographic transition' of the post-1960s period has inaugurated a period of stable, below-replacement total fertility rates (TFR). More secular individuals tend not to desire large families. (Lesthaeghe & Surkyn 1988: 24) Moreover, while liberal-minded 'postmaterialists' do not *desire* fewer children than average, they tend to have children later in life, and hence *actually* have a lower TFR than more traditionally-minded 'materialists.' (Van de Kaa 2001)

What will the future hold for Fukuyama's 'postmodern' liberal-capitalist society when its chief exponents have a stable below-replacement TFR while committed religious groups continue to grow? Much of course depends on rates of apostasy and the religiosity of immigrants. Yet the American evidence suggests that strongly religious individuals and communities may be rejecting liberal modernity in a new way. The old denominational 'ladder of opportunity' which drew large numbers of the ambitious from conservative to liberal denominations looks to be crumbling. (Roof & McKinney 1987; Hout et al. 2001) As a result, the strongly religious may be successfully inoculating their members against the charms of liberalism. In this kind of climate, one might speculate that religiosity is like a cultural gene (coined a 'meme' by Richard Dawkins) which will allow religious cultures to survive the evolutionary bottleneck of today's demographic transition. (Dawkins 1989; Runciman 1997) This is already producing political consequences: 'red' states that supported Bush in 2004 had a 12-point fertility advantage over 'blue' Kerry states. In Israel, the secular/liberal population has a TFR nearly four times lower than that of the ultra-Orthodox. The latter are papered to make up a quarter of Israeli Jews under age 17 by 2025, a demographic earthquake which cannot but affect the volatile politics of the region. For anyone concerned with the fate of the ideas of the Enlightenment, contemporary demographics pose a striking challenge that demands urgent investigation.

Methodology

We can state the hypothesis as follows:

H⁰: Religiosity leads to higher fertility

H¹: Religiosity will eventually grow over time due to higher fertility among the religious population

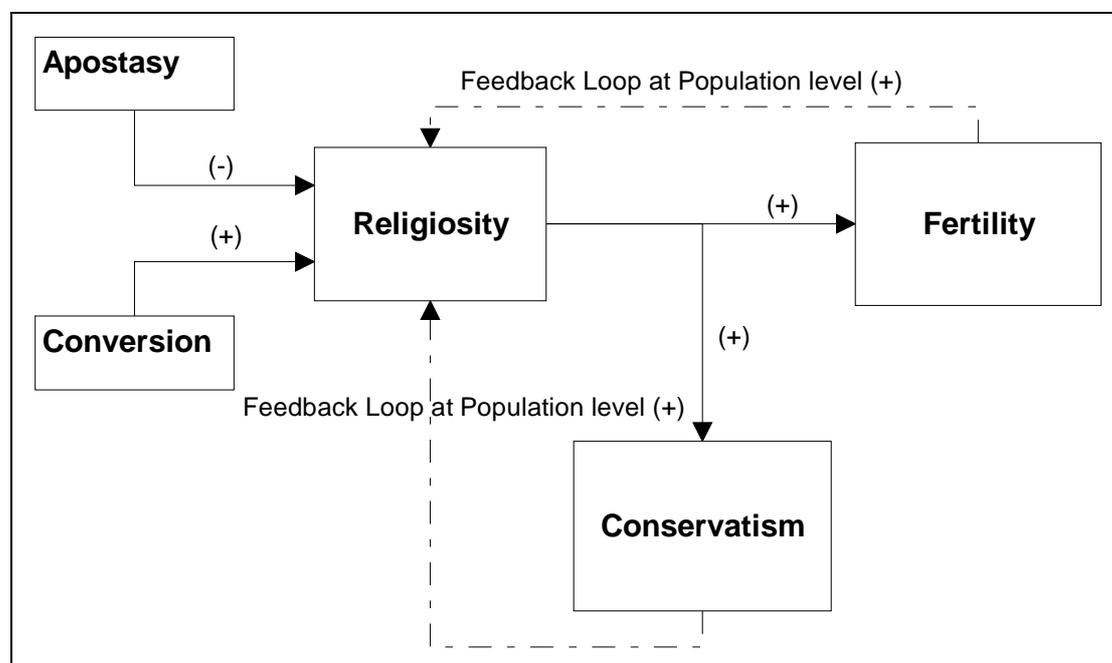
H²: Religiosity is linked to more conservative attitudes and voting patterns

H³: Religious replacement of secular populations will, over generations, erode the secular-liberal ('end of history') ethos of developed western societies

Furthermore, H¹ and H³ can only hold if:

H⁴: Trends in religious apostasy/conversion and international migration do not mitigate the trend toward growing religiosity and conservatism

We might represent the model schematically as follows:



This model is clearly a system of equations of the form $y = \int (\beta_1 + \beta_2 \dots)$. In equation 1, $y = \text{fertility}$ and $\beta_1 = \text{religiosity}$; in equation 2, $y = \text{conservatism}$ and $\beta_1 = \text{religiosity}$; $\beta_2 \dots$ represent control variables. There is certainly recurrent causation at the level of population, though not necessarily at the individual level. We will therefore be testing a two-stage model.

The study will use data from the General Social Survey, European Values Survey and two British longitudinal surveys (BHPS and ONS Longitudinal). This will provide both a time-series and cross-sectional (or pooled) test of the proposition that the link between religiosity, fertility and politics persists across generations.

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