

Religion, Nationalism and Demography: False Consciousness, Real
Consequences¹

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Abstract

We may treat religion as an immanent belief system which directly guides human action, or as a social phenomenon in which the actual content of the belief is contingent. The first course leads into a series of contradictions: neither the beliefs nor their consequences are consistent, nor eternal over time. As social phenomena, however, religions differ from nationalisms only in the referent of their expressed belief: an otherworldly sacred being or a this-worldly sacred community, and the two are often conflated. If in the past men killed and died for their gods, today they do so for their country. Demographic events, childbirth and death, may similarly be treated as individual events or as social phenomena subject to group, and not just individual, control. In this paper we consider the relations between these two sets of social phenomena, religion and nationalism on one hand, demographic processes on the other, and the contradictions inherent in ignoring the social element in the explanation of their interrelationship. We go on to suggest a mode of explanation that treats demographic phenomena as an element in the interrelations between social groups.

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Introduction

Marx ([1843] 1964) noted that the criticism of religion is the beginning of all criticism. Criticism, the scientific analysis of social phenomena, begins with the recognition that many self-evident truths are socially created fantasies, or mental constructs, and that these fantasies are themselves social phenomena that need to be explained. Indeed, explaining how such fantasies are generated is part and parcel of the whole project of understanding social processes and social relationships in general, and may well be, as the young Marx suggested, the key to such understanding.

There is a wide gap between our experience of religion as members of the society in which we live, and the sociological understanding of religion as an object of analysis. In our social (as opposed to sociological) role, religion presents itself to us as a set of ideas, we declare ourselves to be religious or nonreligious, believers, agnostics, atheists or somewhere in between, thus treating these ideas as entities in their own right. We insist that these ideas guide and explain our actions and decisions, as indeed they often do. There is also a wealth of research evidence pointing to the connection between expressed beliefs and actions relating to sexual behaviour, childbearing and contraception, the acceptance of lifesaving medical interventions, and even life-threatening behaviour.

In our sociological role, however, we often recognise these beliefs as an ideal expression of the relationship between ourselves and others, a declaration of who we are in the society and to which section of the society we do, and do not, belong. “Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought, and views of life . . . The single individual, who derives them through tradition and upbringing, may imagine that they form the real motives and the starting point of his activity” (Marx, [1852] 1934:37).

We seek to explain social action in terms of these relationships, and the ideas and ideals which individuals espouse are a part of this social action, a part which over time shapes these relationships no less than it is shaped by them. This is not just an issue of viewing rational actors building their goal-oriented action within a particular cultural context (Burch, 1988; Joshi & David, 1996; Kertzer, 1997), we need to break down this conceptual wall between the actor and the situation. People do “act” in the Weberian sense, they think, they plan, what they do is meaningful in terms of how they view the situation and what they are trying to achieve. Nonetheless, the concepts we use, the logical pathways we follow, our evaluations of the desirable and the good, are all socially generated. With Durkheim we may say that nothing ever appears in the individual consciousness that did not find a previous expression in the *conscience collective*. Even rational actor theory and human culture

are social constructs, just as much as is the idea of Jewish community or the memory of Jesus on the cross.

In the following paper we shall use the above ideas as a guideline in the interpretation of the reported relation between religion and demographic events, with a particular focus on fertility. Religious affiliation is often, but not always, associated with differences in the level of fertility. However, these differences are not necessarily in line with what we might expect from an analysis of the creed. Rather, they tend to be associated more with religious group-membership than with religiosity as expressed at the individual level. Furthermore, we suggest that, as social phenomena, religion and nationalism are essentially identical and are often conflated and mutually reinforcing. Indeed, in this sociological sense, none of us is free of religion, though its intensity clearly varies and may even, under certain circumstances, be sorely compromised.

Fertility control and monotheistic religions

Fertility and the Christianities

The common wisdom is, or was, that Catholics don't contracept, and that fertility control among Catholics is therefore likely to be less efficient than among most other (Christian) groups. We should therefore expect Catholic populations to have a

relatively high level of fertility. This may have been true 40 years ago (Westoff et al. 1963) but little over a decade later, in the United States, Westoff and Janes (1979) showed it to be otherwise (see also Herold et al., 1989). In Quebec, a quintessentially Catholic society, fertility plummeted within one generation from being among the highest to the lowest in North America (Anson, 2000; Krull and Trovato, 2003). Figure 1 presents comparative time-trends in fertility over four decades for four pairs of European states, one Catholic, one not. In each case there is a decline from baby-boom to baby-bust, as fertility declines from over 2.5 to less than two children per woman. The baby-boom in Holland was at a higher level than in Belgium, but with the end of the boom the two curves converged in the mid-seventies, and have been indistinguishable since then; fertility in Poland was higher than in Bulgarian till the late 1960s, since when they have followed essentially the same path, converging after 2000; fertility levels in Portugal and Greece converged in the mid-1970s, though in Portugal fertility has been slightly higher since the mid-1980s, and the UK and France have had essentially the same level of fertility since the Second World War. Thus, even in those cases where there was a Catholic advantage in early years, this mostly disappeared after the 1970s, and it is in precisely the more observant of the four Catholic countries, Poland and Portugal, that the decline is steepest and the current level is at or below 1.5 children per woman in her lifetime.

Figure 1 about here

The Papal Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, given by Pope Paul VI in 1968 (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html) is a carefully argued document which (for those who accept its premises) makes a cogent argument against the conscious use of contraception, and it remains the official Catholic position to this day. Yet all the evidence suggests that, in the Western world at least, where the Catholic-Protestant divide rarely carries any political significance, Catholic teachings are no longer reflected in a higher level of fertility. The two countries with the lowest fertility in Western Europe today, Italy and Spain, are Catholic (in 2003 both had a Total Fertility of 1.3, and in the mid-1990s it had dropped to below 1.2); in Puerto Rico, Herold et al. (1989) reported that it was precisely the more devout Catholics who had the lower fertility, and in Quebec, too, fertility is lowest among the Catholic Francophone population. If there is a Catholic fertility effect today, it is as much to lower fertility as to raise it, irrespective of the teachings of the Church.

Jewish fertility

God's first commandment to Man and Woman following their creation was to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Genesis, 1:28). It may thus seem only

natural that this clearly pro-natalist injunction is reflected in the high level of fertility in Israel (in 2004, 2.7 among Jews *sensu stricto*, compared with a European average of 1.5, see CBS, 2006, Table 3.12; INED, http://www.ined.fr/en/pop_figures/developed_countries/total_fertility/). Furthermore, there is consistent evidence that the fertility of the religiously observant Jewish population is higher than that of the rest of the population (Friedlander & Feldman, 1992; Landau, 2003). Outside Israel, however, in Europe and in North America, Jews have had consistently lower fertility than have their Gentile neighbours for at least the past century (Goldscheider, 1967; Prais & Schmool, 1973), and this difference remains even after controlling for race, urban or metropolitan residence, education, occupation, income and other socioeconomic variables (Goldscheider and Uhlenberg, 1969). In more recent studies, De1laPergola (1993) has shown that this difference is maintained even under the very low fertility conditions prevailing in European countries today, and Goldscheider and Mosher (1988), comparing different religious groups in a national U.S. sample, showed that Jewish women have the highest proportion of contraceptive users, overall, and as a proportion of women at risk of an unwanted pregnancy (neither pregnant, infertile, postpartum nor actively seeking pregnancy). Jewish women also had the highest proportion in this at-risk group, and the lowest proportion postpartum. Comparing different Jewish denominations in Britain, Prais & Schmool (1973) showed that the fertility of Orthodox Jews was only slightly above the overall

British average, and in the United States, Cheskis (1980) showed that while denominationally affiliated Jews had higher fertility than the non-affiliated, this effect was actually stronger for Conservative than for Orthodox Jews. Thus, even if Jewish religiosity in the Diaspora is associated with higher fertility (relative to other Jews), this is more a function of Jewish affiliation and identification than of orthodoxy *per se*. As with Catholic fertility, any explanation of a particular level of fertility in terms of religiosity must show why, and under what circumstances, norms and religious injunctions are or are not directly translated into practice.

Islam and fertility

Compared with Catholicism and Orthodox Judaism, Islam is considerably more equivocal on issues of contraception and fertility control. The *Qur'an* and the teachings of Mohammed recognise and condone the use of withdrawal, and by extension, nonpermanent forms of contraception are accepted by most Moslem theologians (Morgan et al., 2002; McGuire 2001). Yet a number of studies, particularly in the past decade, have indicated that Moslems tend to have higher fertility than their non-Moslem neighbours, and to view contraception as antithetical to their beliefs. In Israel, the fertility of Moslems, though dropping, is still 50 per cent higher than that of the Jews and almost double that of the Arab Christians (Anson & Meir,

1996; CBS, 2006: Tables 3.12, 3.13). In Bangladesh, Amin et al. (1997) found a lower rate of contraceptive use among strict Moslems than among other Moslems or Hindus, though using a multi-level approach they were able to show that this was more an effect of mean religiosity at the district level than of individual religiosity. Morgan et al. (2002), comparing the fertility of Moslems and non-Moslems in 14 pairs of South Asian communities found that the Moslem communities tended to have a higher level of fertility, desired more children, and had lower rates of contraceptive use among those who did not want more children. Yet, despite their expectations, they found little aggregate association between this higher fertility and lower female autonomy, and they suggest that the higher fertility of Moslems needs to be looked at in terms of local level political advantage and global pan-Islamic influences and responses, rather than in terms of individual belief. Alagarajan (2003), analysing the differences in fertility between Moslems and Hindus in Kerala State, found that Moslems had considerably higher fertility at low levels of education, but that there was no difference at higher levels of education. He concluded that religion should not be seen as a uniform effect, but rather that it means different things to different people, depending on their social location. Borooah (2004) takes this argument one step further, and argues for a distinction between, on the one hand, individual endowments, in terms of education, material resources, etc. and on the other hand, their responses to these endowments. These responses will vary according to

geographical location, group membership, and the group's degree of institutional organisation. Thus, as a result of their being more organised under a central religious authority than Hindus, there is less variation in Moslems' response than there is for other religious groups in India.

Despite appearances, however, the higher fertility of Moslems is not universal. Goldstein (1970) reported that in Thailand, before the fertility decline, fertility was *lower* among the Moslem than among the Buddhist population, even allowing for the more urban, middle class situation of the Moslem population, and this despite an expressed commitment to large families among Moslems. And today most Moslem populations are in transition (Tabutin & Schoumaker, 2005): there are more than 30 states with a Moslem majority, and by the early 21st century fertility in over one-quarter of these had dropped to below three children per woman (including Iran 2.1, Tunisia and Kazakhstan, 2.0, and Azerbaijan 1.9 in 2000-2005 (U.N. estimates, Human Development Reports, <http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/>, Table 5, downloaded 8/10/2006). If, at the other end of the scale, we find Djibouti, 5.1; Eritrea, 5.5; Occupied Palestinian Territories, 5.6, and Yemen, 6.2, their high fertility is far more convincingly attributable to their specific social conditions than to a strict adherence to Islam (see, e.g. Fargues, 2000).

As can be seen from this brief survey, the relation between religious belief and the level of fertility is more apparent than real. There are clear religious differences

in the level of fertility, and these are often associated with an expressed pro-natalism grounded in religion, but there are sufficient counterexamples to make us look deeper into this relationship and ask: even where there is an association between beliefs and the level of fertility, is religious pro-natalism the *cause* of higher fertility, or is the relation between high-fertility and religious pro-natalism a spurious association, with both of these derived from the nature of the group's internal organisation and its relations with others? As McQuillan (2004) argues, we need to look beyond particularised theology and see conditions under which religion influences fertility, and in which direction. The three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – may be associated with higher fertility not because of their teachings, which vary considerably, but through their hierarchical clerical structures. Examples of high fertility, whether Catholic, Jewish or Moslem, appear to occur where the church is all encompassing, and the focus of conflict with a colonial or other outside power. In other cases a pro-natal theology is no necessary obstacle to fertility decline.

Religion: A social phenomenon

Much of the scientific discussion of religion as a social institution implicitly or explicitly stems from Emile Durkheim's analysis of religion (Durkheim, [1912] 1915,

[1919] 1973). For Durkheim, a religion is composed of three major elements: a community, a set of rites and practices, and a set of beliefs and representations which interpret these rites and practices. Although the rites and practices vary from one religion to another, they all act to focus attention on the community and its central role in the life of each individual. Collective actions are public ceremonies, religious festivals, rites and rituals undertaken with other people. On such occasions, peoples' ". . . thoughts are centered upon their common beliefs, their common traditions, the memory of their ancestors, the collective idea of which they are the incarnation; in a word, upon social things" (Durkheim, 1915, pp. 348-349).

At the same time, the rites and representations create a division between the profane world of everyday objects and the sacred world of objects identified as such pragmatically, through the respect and fear which they generate. In this process, religious rites invoke a supernatural force which, Durkheim argued, is a representation of the superhuman moral force of society. Religion is thus ubiquitous in social life, in the sense that no social group can exist without ritualized collective action focussed on group membership. "[S]ociety can not make its influence felt unless it is in action, and it is not in action unless the individuals who compose it are assembled together and act in common. It is by common action that it takes consciousness of itself and realises its position" (1915, p. 418).

However, it is not only the society which is strengthened, for “[t]he individual soul is regenerated, too, by being dipped again in the sources from which its life came; consequently, it feels itself stronger, more fully master of itself, less dependent on physical necessities” (1915, p. 349). Consequently, “he feels within himself a power of which he is not normally conscious, a power which is absent when he is not in a religious state. The religious life implies the existence of very special forces . . . forces that move mountains . . . Thus strengthened it seems to him that he is better equipped to face the trials and difficulties of existence and he can even bend nature to his own designs” ([1919] 1973, p.182).

Individuals’ beliefs, emotions and behaviours thus cannot be understood in terms of individual psychology alone, but must be interpreted through reference to the social context in which people live. What is real is the group, its practices and its beliefs – but not necessarily the referent of these beliefs. These beliefs are a representation, an expression in consciousness of the real world, as it is lived by the believers, and of their relations with this world, which includes their relations with others, but no more than that. “*Religious* suffering is at the same time an *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of a soulless condition”

(Marx, 1964:43-44). It is the nexus of human relations which has ontological priority over both beliefs and actions, including religious beliefs and contraceptive practices.

Nationalism as Religion

Once we have abandoned the other worldly referent, the belief system, as the essence of religion, and interpreted it instead as a social phenomenon based on the group, its practices and its beliefs, we see that sociologically nothing separates religion from nationalism or ethnic group membership, and indeed, they are often coterminous (Fox, 2004). As in religion, the nation too has its identified – or at least, its imagined – group, its practices, its beliefs, and its sacred symbols (Anderson, 1991; Gittus, 2002; Rowbottom, 2002), and if, in the past, men killed and died for their gods, today they do so for their country.

The God, so to speak, of the nation, the fantastic and sacred being onto which the group spirit is projected, is the modern nation-state, either as it exists or as it is envisioned. This does *not* mean, however, that the nation and the state are coterminous (Beck, 2003; Chernilo, 2006). Indeed, most, if not all, nation-states have non-national minorities within their borders and a national diaspora beyond their borders. Rather, it is the set of nation-states, and the relations between them, which form the circumstance within which particular nationalisms are formulated and

expressed and within which nationalist struggles evolve. As globalisation melts down political and economic borders, nationalism may find alternative expressions, alternative modes of giving meaning to the state and the nations' relations with others: through language (Moorti, 2004; Oakes, 2005), through diet (Caldwell, 2003), or through a local transformation of global symbols (Ram, 2004).

Nationalism is an assertion by the group-for-itself that it must "assert or extend [its] rights in the political arena in order to defend possibilities for [its] continued existence as a group . . . (Wallerstein, 1979: 184). The nationalist sentiment thus has its origins not in an apparent group subjectivity *sui generis*, but in the uneven development of the world economy. The world system is characterised by a constant struggle for preferential access to scarce resources, and a strong state has always been the principal mechanism by which the local bourgeoisie has been able to control its own fortunes (Wallerstein, 1974; Delacroix and Ragin, 1981; Cochrane, 1986).

Nationalism, or ethnic identity, thus takes on many forms: it is the revolt of the weak, resisting the predations of this uneven development whereby material progress has come to mean domination of the less by the more (materially) advanced nations, the breakup of traditional communities and the generation of expectations far exceeding the material benefits; it is the demand by semi-peripheral states, who are seeking to transform their structural role in the world economy, to enjoy the fruits of their new progress, but is also the rearguard action of core economies seeking to

preserve their advantage over the encroachments of new centres (Nairn, 1977; Gellner, 1983; Wallerstein, 1984; Yegenoglu, 2005).

What is common to all these formations is:

- I. A consciousness of themselves as groups, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of nonmembers, and reflected in such social markers as language, dress, diet, etc.;
- ii. An ascriptive continuity over time, so that membership is conferred at birth, and births to the group make up its next generation;
- iii. An endogenous pattern whereby marriage and procreation within the group are preferred to marriage and procreation with a partner from outside the group;
- iv. A determinate position in the social structure, in the sense of a certain commonality of occupation and of physical and social location;

Nonetheless, the group, as nation or ethnicity, remains an imagined entity, real in as much as it exists in peoples' minds, but still an expression in consciousness of an underlying reality, a metaphor for the essence of human relationships under particular historical circumstances. Because of their definition in primordial, ascriptive terms, ethnic groups are experienced, from within and without, as existing because of their members' intense and comprehensive solidarity, and their attachment of ineffable significance to this group identity (Shils, 1957). But, again,

because these groups are defined in ideal, and not in material, terms, there appears to be no one objective basis on which these attachments are formed. The various bases – tribal origin; race; religion; national origin, or region (see e.g. Laitin, 1986; Geertz, 1973 ; Hechter, 1975 for various examples of definitions in these terms) – are all, first and foremost, symbols for the expression of similarity and of difference. They are all distinctions which point back, directly or indirectly, to some form of mythical ancestor or ancestor group from which, implicitly, all present day members are descended, and all of whose descendants are today members of the group. What is critical for group membership, then, is the form, rather than the content of the group definition, their integration into a network of relationships defined in terms of specific, apparently ascriptive characteristics, which thus come to provide the focus of a corporate feeling of oneness, on the one hand, and of differentiation on the other.

Over time, however, this ascriptive basis of group definition is considerably less rigid than it seems, or than it is recognised as being. Various examples point to both group membership, and boundaries, as changing, and doing so in such a way as to maintain the unitary nature and appearance of the group as a whole, while losing and gaining particular individuals. Despite appearances, ethnicity is neither primordial, nor a constant, ascribed trait. It is variable, a constantly unfolding process in which "the so called 'foreign heritage' of ethnic groups is taking shape in this country" (Yancey, Ericksen & Juliani, 1976). Anderson and Silver (1983) report on the

constant shifts in composition of ethnic groups in the Soviet Union over time; Horowitz (1975) gives a variety of examples of groups fusing, and of groups splitting up, as patterns of employment and political relationship change over time. Bonacich and Modell (1980) document the growth of Japanese American ethnicity as a self consciousness which grew in interaction with the hostile environment of California in the 1930s and 1940s. This was, they note, a two-way relationship, with a common class membership, as middleman traders, promoting ethnicity at the same time as ethnicity was the vehicle by which the common class positions were established, and relations between groups were patterned. In the past fifty years hostility has largely evaporated, the Japanese have lost their economic identity, and their ethnic self consciousness has weakened, so that intermarriage rates, for instance, are now very high. In a similar vein, Leon ([1946] 1970) documented the maintenance of the Jews as a trading, middleman community over the past two millennia. On the one hand, individuals and communities which turned to other, non trading, occupations tended to leave the faith, and on the other, those who did bear the same relationship to society as a whole were incorporated.

What we are suggesting is that ethnic or population groups are socially meaningful identities, not because of their intrinsic content but because of a synthetic content given to them by insiders and outsiders in particular social contexts. They are mythical formulations which are true not because they conform to reality, but by

virtue of their creative ability to reconstruct reality in peoples' minds (Durkheim, 1953: Ch. 2; 1983, Lecture 17). It is in recognising these distinctions that we make them real (cf. the Thomas Theorem, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences", quoted in Merton, 1957: 421). In Levi-Strauss' terms (1963), ethnic identities are versions of totemic labels, chosen because they are 'good to think', they make sense in and of a particular social context, not because they are necessarily a true representation of the world ('good to eat').

This definition of the situation is not self generating, however, as might be understood from Durkheim's conceptualisation. Rather, it has an underlying real referent in the material relations between people, a referent which is obscured in the process of its objectification, but whose essence is nonetheless reproduced in the relations between these groupings. "(M)ythology inevitably adopts the structure of the problem whose opacity has been the cause of its birth" (Lukacs, 1972:194), and this 'problem' is one of class relations and class conflict.

Class Relations as Deep Structure

We wish to argue that ethnicity, nationality, and religion are all immediate expressions, in consciousness and in action, of an underlying class relationship, not a mapping of one type of consciousness (class) into another (ethnicity). There has been a subtle, but deep shift in the analysis of class over the past century. In the

classical Marxian analysis, class is an underlying dynamic, the dialectical mediation by which immediately perceived relations between individuals, as they unfold over time, may be understood as a struggle over the distribution of humanly produced resources. The domain of these relations encompasses the whole of social life, not just one particular sphere, central as that might be. In a letter written in 1894, for instance, Engels defined economic relations as ". . .the *entire technique* of production and transport . . . (including) the *geographical basis* on which they operate and those remnants of earlier stages of economic development which have actually been transmitted and have survived . . . also of course the external milieu which surrounds this form of society" (reproduced in Marx & Engels, 1934:516-7). Indeed, Lukacs has suggested that it is precisely this appreciation of the 'totality' of social relations, far more than the specific conclusions, which distinguishes the Marxian from other forms of analysis (1971, esp. Chs. 1 and 2).

For most sociologists today, by contrast, classes are defined precisely by the immediate structural *location* of individuals in the process of production, as managers, employees, supervisors, etc., or as the possession of personal resources (wealth, income, education, etc.). Class conflict has become a derived phenomenon, predicated on the specific interests of these conflicting locations. Class consciousness, in turn, is interpreted as an awareness that these locationally defined interests do

indeed conflict, an awareness that often has to be inculcated by outsiders (see for instance Giddens, 1973:116; Willer & Zollschan, 1964). The consequence is a model of stasis, not of process. Change is no longer immanent, it has become a problem to be explained, as structures transform themselves, and the whole set of class relations now appears as "a frozen reality that nevertheless is caught up in an unremitting, ghostly movement" (Lukacs, 1971:181). As Thompson noted:

Sociologists who have stopped the time-machine and, with a good deal of conceptual huffing and puffing, have gone down to the engine-room to look, tell us that nowhere at all have they been able to locate and classify a class. They can only find a multitude of people with different occupations, status-hierarchies, and the rest. Of course they are right, since class is not this or that part of the machine, but *the way the machine works* once it is set in motion - not this interest and that interest, but the friction of interests - the movement itself, the heat, the thundering noise. Class is a social and cultural formation (often finding institutional expression) which cannot be defined abstractly, or in isolation, but only in terms of relationships with other classes; and, ultimately, the definition can only be made in the medium of *time* - that is, action and reaction, change and conflict. When we speak of a class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same categories of interests, social experiences, traditions and value systems, who have a *disposition to behave* as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways. But class is not a thing, it is a happening (1978: 295).

We need to return to this concept of class identity as a useful shorthand, not something directly observable. One of Marx's objections to the Gotha Programme

was that it is not the 'working class' which will emancipate 'labour', but the "emancipation of the working class must be the act of the workers themselves" (in Marx & Engels, 1959: 120). What are observable are groups defined in terms of the three elements of the Weberian triumvirate: market relations; cultural relations, and political relations. But the groups which define themselves, in consciousness and in action, in these contexts are all conscious expressions of the same underlying class dynamic, and it is through struggle between these immediate expressions that the real historical classes define themselves. As an expression of class consciousness, they are all 'false' in the sense that they objectify the class relationship, and fix it on something other than its real material underpinning; at the same time they are 'real' in the sense that actions of insiders and of outsiders are predicated on the recognition of this identity. The development of the deeper class structure is not immanently given, but is in dialectical relation with its own expression in individual consciousness and action, on the one hand shaping and constraining them, on the other hand being shaped by them. "Men make their own history , but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (Marx, [1852] 1934:10).

Fertility as a Social Phenomenon

The dominant paradigm in fertility research is that of rational action: given a set of economic, social and cultural conditions or characteristics, can we predict, or reproduce, the level of fertility in a given population or individual (Neyer & Andersson, 2004)? The paradigmatic method is a statistical model in which the number of births (total fertility at the population level, children ever born at the individual level) is modelled as a function of various predictor variables, so that the outcome is broken down into that part which is *determined* by the predictors, and random error which is *indeterminate*. There have been some attempts to consider cultural and social structural effects but, as Pollak and Watkins (1993) noted, this has largely taken the form of culture as a group identifier, or a bundle of preferences according to which actors make their choices. As a result, the cultural component of the explanation has been little more than a tautology (de Bruijn, 1997), identifying pro- and anti-natalist predispositions and situations and seeking their reflections in levels of fertility. Rarely have fertility and its control been viewed as part of the same process as social change or the making of the collective identity (Kraeger, 1994. For an important exception, see Lesthaeghe, 1977).

While such an approach may be useful in identifying groups with high and low levels of fertility, we find it lacking as an explanation giving insight into the way

men's and women's lives are organised, meanings generated, and the way in which production and reproduction are connected (Joshi & David, 1996). Rational choice analysis reduces conscious human action into a combination of preprogrammed reactions to a world beyond the individual's control, on the one hand, and of random error on the other. As rational thinkers, then, individuals are but the object of their circumstances, and it is only in their aimless inexplicability that they are a controlling subject (cf. Lukacs, 1971:89, "in consequence of the rationalisation of the work-process the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as *mere sources of error* when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational prediction," emphasis in original). The free acting individual appears to be merely an interpretive machine, of dubious quality, reacting to the material and moral constraints of his environment. At the same time, society as a human product is eliminated, and it appears instead as a self evolving context in which individual action takes place, but which the individual is helpless to affect.

Radical critiques of classical theory can be as guilty of this as those they criticise, presenting high fertility as a rational response to endemic poverty and insecurity in Less Developed Countries (Thomas, 1991). In making of this interpretation a necessary one they assume, no less than do the classical economists, that in given circumstances there is only one way of viewing the world, and only one

rational (that is, sane) response to it. Clearly, an appreciation of the subjective definition of the situation is an important advance over imposing observers' definitions. However, such an appreciation must be context-specific, and consider how and why the particular definition of the situation arose. To see a particular pattern of action as *the* rational response is to view consciousness as being immediately determined by material conditions, and thus does not address the question of how, and under what circumstances, particular forms of consciousness evolve, and the extent to which human actions can shape the material environment.

Social science is not a natural science precisely because it is concerned with process, not with "cause and effect as rigidly opposite poles, (to the total disregard) of interaction . . . [We recognise that] once an historic element has been brought into the world by other elements . . . it also reacts in its turn, and may react on its environment and even on its own causes" (Engels, letter to Mehring, 1893, reproduced in Marx and Engels, 1934: 512). Consciousness, and social historical processes are neither predetermined, nor arbitrary. "The problem is to find a model for the social process which allows an autonomy to social consciousness within a context which, in the final analysis, has always been determined by social being . . . A model (which encompasses) the distinctively human dialectic, by which history appears as neither willed nor *fortuitous*, as neither *lawed* (in the sense of being

determined by involuntary laws of motion), nor illogical (in the sense that one can observe a *logic* in the social process)" (Thompson, 1978: 291, emphasis in the original). The construction of such a model requires that consciousness be recognised as a social, not an individual phenomenon. Individuals, and certainly individual minds, exist only in particular social and historical context. "Human thinking is primarily an overt act conducted in terms of the common culture, and is only secondarily a private matter," (Geertz, 1973:83). If the human mind acts rationally, within the limits of its capabilities, it does so on a world experienced in the light of common, socially generated perceptions. Before there can be rational choice, a choice set must be defined (Amin, 1974), and this definition is given not only by the material conditions but also intersubjectively, through the interaction of individuals in common relation to these material conditions.

Group relations and fertility

The almost consensual focus on fertility as action at the individual level has given us very little in the way of theorising fertility as social action, a phenomenon which has meaning at the group rather than at the individual level. One exception has been the minority group hypothesis, first put forward by Goldscheider and Uhlenberg (1969), which argues that fertility levels should be analysed in terms of a group's relations

with other groups with which it interacts. Over the years this hypothesis has received a number of interpretations, mostly at the individual, social-psychological level (Halli, 1989; Tang & Trovarto, 1998). Minority group membership has come to be interpreted as an individual characteristic with implications for the person's sense of marginalisation, insecurity, etc. By contrast, we wish to argue for a reading of fertility as a part of the group's survival strategy. A discriminated but well endowed minority, struggling to compete with the majority on their, the majority's, terms will restrict its fertility as it concentrates its resources and its efforts on that competition, and on assuring the quality of its progeny and their ability to compete. On the other hand, a discriminated minority which lacks the human capital to compete with the majority, or which is seeking to create a separate social entity, will tend to increase its fertility as it seeks to maximise its political strength and seeks security in numbers and in family solidarity. This translates, at the individual level, into a pattern of statistical interaction, whereby the negative effect of education on fertility is greater for minority groups (Jews, Blacks, Chinese, etc.) than for the mainstream and for second than for first generation immigrants (Trovato & Burch, 1980; Trovato 1981; Kposowa, 1997), a pattern similar to one we saw above for Moslems in India.

However, group effects need to be analysed at the level of group action, not just at their reflection in individual behaviour.

1. Sabagh and Lopez (1978) compared the fertility of pro-natalist Chicanos (Mexican Americans) in Los Angeles. They compared two groups, those living in a Chicano neighbourhood and exposed to a dense network of community and Spanish-language ties, and those living in Anglo- or non Chicano neighbourhoods and hence lacking many of these ties. Despite the pro-natalist group norm, it was precisely the first group who had lower fertility, though their standard of living was somewhat lower than the ostensibly more integrated group. Kohli (1998) analysed the fertility of endogenously-married Asian Indian women in the United States, comparing those who spoke English at home with those speaking an Indian language. As with the Chicano case, those who maintained a strong cultural link with their non-Anglo origins had fewer children than the more assimilated English speakers (net of relevant socioeconomic variables). However, lest it be thought that these are just further examples of group solidarity providing security and hence a lessened desire for children, it must be noted that Israeli kibbutzim, the quintessence of the new Israel and of social security, at least until the late 1980s, had a higher level of fertility than did the rest of the Jewish population (Keysar et al., 1992; Danziger & Neuman, 1993). It was only when the kibbutzim were hit by an economic and structural crisis that fertility began to fall.

2. Forty years ago, on the eve of the *Revolution Tranquille*, Québécois fertility was among the highest in North America. Today it is among the lowest. Anson (2000) analysed fertility in Montreal in terms of the minority group hypotheses, interpreting its low level as the class action of a minority group struggling to define its national, Francophone identity, within an Anglophone ambience. Québécois nationalism specifies Quebec as a unique reality in an Anglophone North America, and looks to the province to create and maintain the conditions for this uniqueness to express itself. Nonetheless, the Francophone population, in particular the middle class of entrepreneurs and government officials, remains in the classic position of a disadvantaged minority, which expresses itself in lowered Québécois fertility. Looking at fertility in census enumeration districts in Montreal, as recorded at the 1991 census, and contrasting Francophone with Anglophone and other areas, at various levels of education and income, he showed that the Anglo – Franco fertility difference was greatest precisely in those middle-class areas, where competition between the two groups was the most salient. Figure 2 plots Child-Women Ratios (CWR) by the major language spoken and the level of education in the enumeration areas. At low levels of education there are no real differences between language groups; at the intermediate levels fertility declines moving from Anglo- to Francophone to Mixed to Other, with little

difference between Anglo- and Francophone areas. By contrast, in areas typified by a University level of education, areas where the struggle for control, to be "*maîtres chez nous*," is most keenly felt, Francophone fertility is significantly lower than that of any other language group.

Figure 2 about here

3. A number of studies have sought to explain the high fertility of Mormons (members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints), in particular those residing in Utah (Pitcher et al., 1974), a pattern which appears unaffected by SES (Heaton, 1986). This high fertility is generally explained by reference to a particularised pro-natalist theology (Bean et al., 1983), even though it is unlikely that Mormon theology is any more opposed to contraception than other Christianities (Willis, 1975) – and we have already seen that Catholic pro-natalism does not necessarily translate into high fertility. As Thornton (1979) notes, there is something about Mormonism which influences childbearing which cannot be accounted for by social and economic characteristics of the individuals. Bean et al. (1983) reject the minority group hypothesis because Mormons are the majority in Utah, but this is too limited a view. We need to look at the Mormons in their relations with the rest of the

United States in order to understand their special status and sense of being a unique, persecuted minority (Soffer, 1986).

4. Fertility in Israel and Palestine are both considerably higher than would be expected given their current levels of socioeconomic development: The UN estimates Palestinian fertility (conservatively) at 5.6, the highest in the Middle east with the exception of Yemen, and in Israel fertility is currently (2005) at 2.6 and 3.7 for the Jewish and Arab populations respectively (CBS, 2006, Table 3.13). As Fargues (2000) points out, fertility has played a major role in the national struggle on both sides. Anson and Meir (1996) analysed Jewish fertility by residential area, using voting patterns to typify these areas on the nationalist – conciliatory and religious – secular dimensions. Figure 3 presents their major result, which shows that fertility was consistently higher in nationalist than in conciliatory areas; that once nationalism was accounted for there was no specific religious effect on fertility, and that whereas fertility in conciliatory areas declined as the standard of living increased, this was not the case in the nationalist areas (a result reminiscent of the Mormon results cited above). They thus concluded that Israeli high fertility was attributable to the salience of the nationalist ethos in the Israeli *conscience collective*, and that it was high not because of any religious prescription, but because of Israel's

special position within the world system: a settler implantation, in the periphery, of a self-sustaining middle class society (Nairn, 1977: 188-189).

Figure 3 about here

Conclusions

The basis of our approach is that both religion and fertility are social processes, both of which occur through the medium of individual action: belief and participation in ritual on the one hand, childbirth on the other. As Durkheim ([1895] 1964) noted, the key to understanding social facts, as he called them, social imperatives which impose themselves on individuals as if from their own volition, is to see their relation with other social facts, and this is what we have tried to do in the above analysis. If fertility is social action which has meaning as a property of the group, we need to analyse high and low levels in terms of the group's relations with other groups, and, we suggest, as part of a group strategy in its struggle with other groups over access to resources. Low and high fertility in Catholic, Moslem, Mormon or Jewish populations do not happen either because of, or despite, any particular set of religious beliefs, but as a response to the real conditions in which people live and define their lives. This response may take the form of an affiliation with a particular religion, which in turn may frame its creed as calling for high fertility, and the high fertility may then be justified in religious terms. This is particularly likely when there is a religious clergy

which can frame and organise group action in religious terms. When circumstance change, so may the religious teachings, on this as on any other issue.

What is true of religion is equally true of nationalism, which, we have argued, is sociologically indistinguishable from religion. As with religion, this is the consciousness of a group for itself, in struggle with others, a consciousness whose content derives from the group's location within the uneven world economy. Religion and nationalism are thus similarly defined: imagined communities, real because their members and others recognise the reality of their existence, real because their members share common rites, beliefs, and sacred symbols, and real because they evolve in relation to other groups. The form is universal, the content, however, is location-specific, built up through manipulation of available symbols, what Lévi-Strauss (1966) termed *bricolage*, though as true of *la pensée civilisée* as of *la pensée sauvage*.

Nationalism and religion are both group phenomena, sources of strength for individuals through their association with the group. At the individual level they are, nonetheless, non-rational phenomena, and their demographic effects, on the level of *individual* fertility, are also non-rational. We thus need to look beyond rational explanations to see religious, national and ethnic effects, within the context of group struggles. This may, or may not, be rational, at the very least it should make sense.

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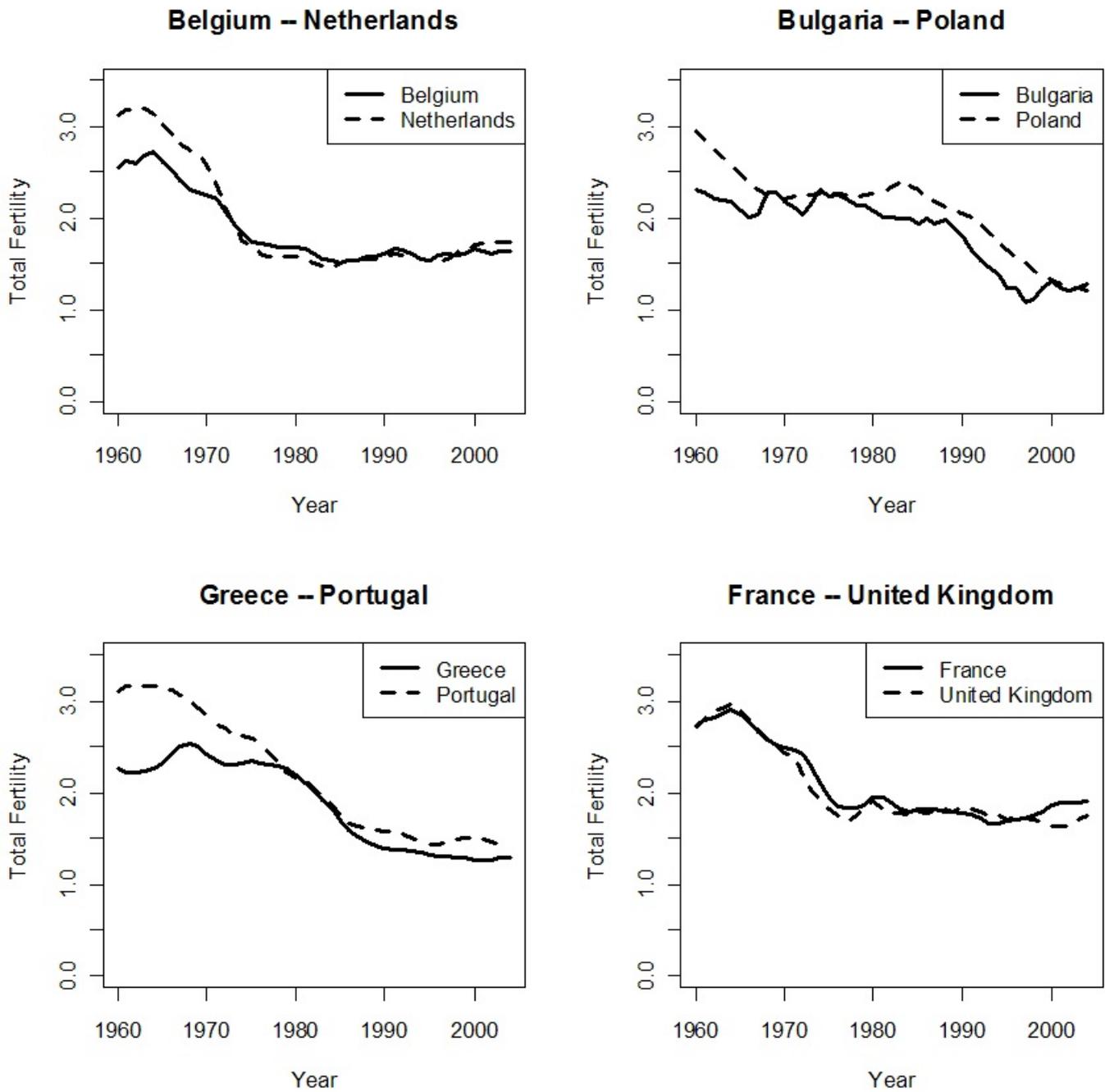
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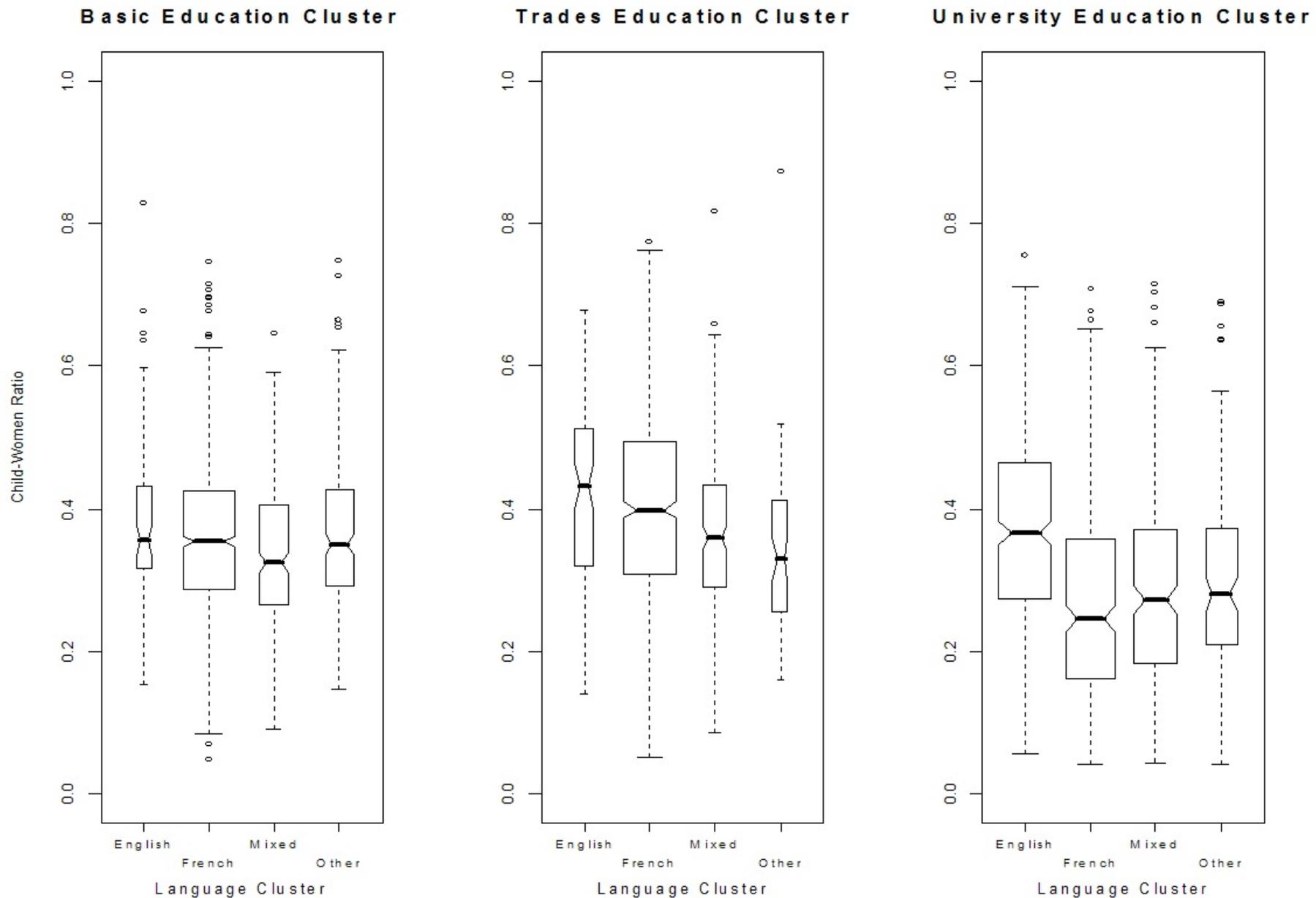
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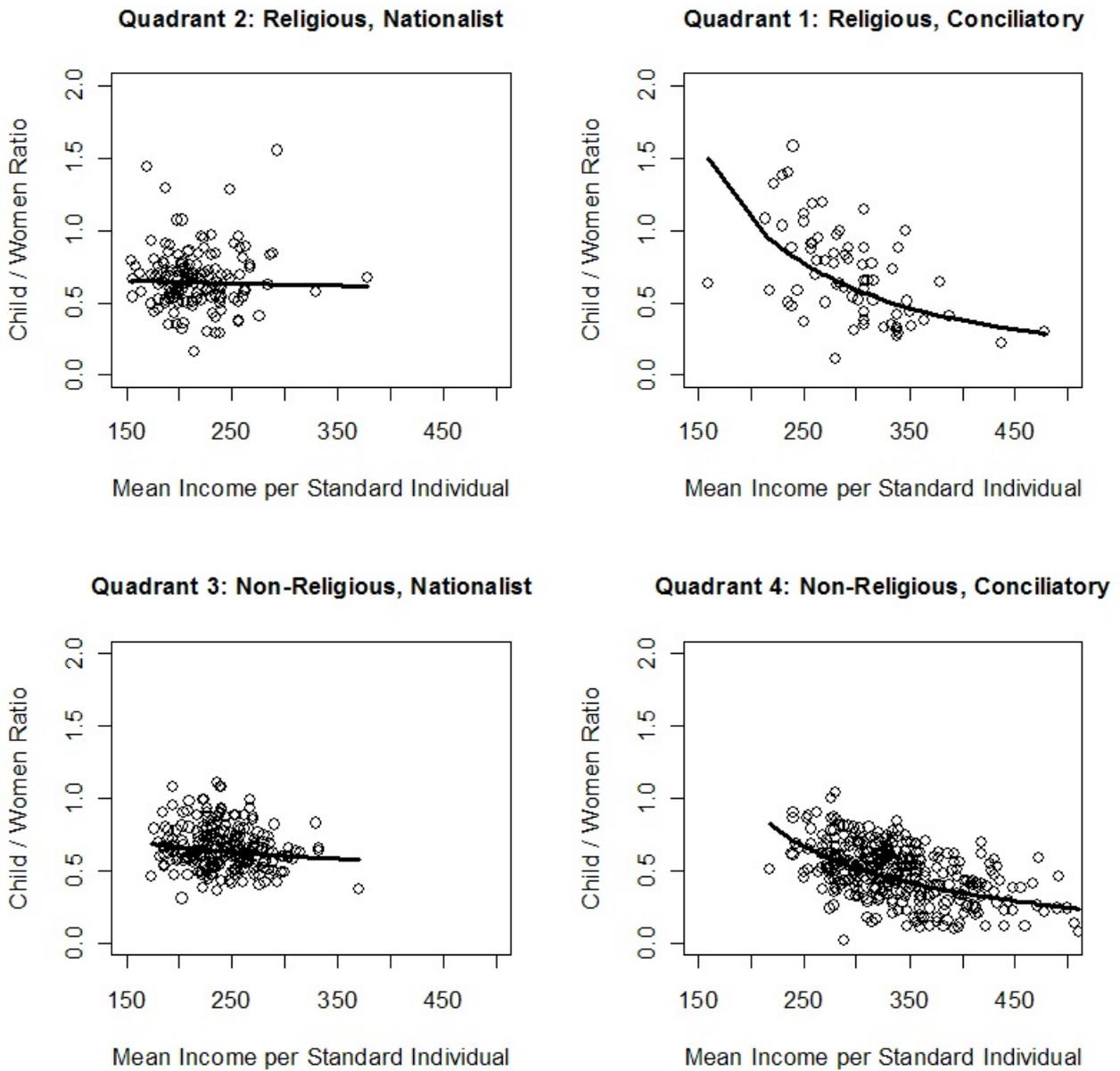
Source: Eurostat, <http://europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat/>

Figure 1: Fertility in Matched pairs of Catholic and non-Catholic Countries



Note: Enumeration Areas are clustered by major level of education: Basic, Trades, or University and by predominant mother tongue: English, French, Mixed or Bilingual, and Other. Boxplots are of Child-Women Ratios by Enumeration Area. Values computed from raw census data, for details see Anson, 2000.

Figure 2: Fertility Child-Women Ratios by Education and Major Language in Montreal Enumeration Areas, 1991



Source: Fertility, income and household size from 1983 Israel census of housing and population; incomes are per month, in thousands of Israeli Shekels. Areas are clustered by returns from 1984 General Election. For details see Anson and Meir, 1996.

Figure 3: Fertility by Standard of Living, Nationalism and Religiosity, Israel Statistical Areas Jews 1983