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Jane C. Schneider, Peter T. Schneider. *Festival of the Poor: Fertility Decline and the Ideology of Class in Sicily, 1860-1980.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996. x + 322 pp. $21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8165-1519-6; $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-1544-8.

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I write this review both after having read the book for my own edification and having taught it in a course entitled Political Economic and Environmental Anthropology (http://www.uwgb.edu7galta/303/). Therefore, I will comment upon it as a contribution to the anthropological demographic literature and as a vehicle for teaching about the political economy of population.

Festival of the Poor is a richly complex book with several intertwined levels. Ostensibly, it is about the demographic transition in a town in western Sicily. It is also about the stigmatization of lower classes by others higher in the social hierarchy, there and elsewhere, through the accusation of excessive fertility. At the same time, it is a critique of a variety of theories about population processes, some of which repeat at a learned level the same stigmatization of the poor. Finally, the book provides a thorough discussion, rare in the literature, of coitus interruptus as the key birth control method used in the European demographic transition.

The Schneiders have organized their book such that chapters dealing with demographic theory alternate with the case study of "Villamaura," the town they have long studied. This movement back and forth between theory and case makes the book an extremely useful teaching tool because it helps students understand the connection. Theoretical discussions cover major debates in the literature about fertility and the demographic transition in Europe (and elsewhere). Students see the range of interpretations available and how a pair of good social scientists have sifted through the possibilities to come up with their own nuanced model.

The book's title stems from a Villamaurese doctor's quip that "sexual embrace is the festival of the poor" (p. 11), used to express the association between poverty and high fertility and the stereotypical notion that the poor in his town had little more in life to look forward to than sexual activity. The Schneiders use this as a starting place to explore the reproductive stigma–the stereotype that the poor are less worthy and, indeed, are poor *because* they do not curb their sexuality and therefore their family sizes.

The first two chapters are theoretical. Chapter One, which reviews the history of theory about the relationship between population and poverty, begins with the positive views of high fertility taken by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century merchantilist theorists and proceeds to critiques leveled at them, principally by Malthus and by Marx and Engels. These discussions are nicely contextualized with information about the expansion of fertility during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and readers gain a sense of how history and contemporaneous theory might be related to one another. There follows a presentation of more modern "demand-for-labor" models of fertility proposed both by historians and anthropologists, which echo Marx and Engels by claiming that changing fertility is a response to economic situational pressures. The Schneiders conclude this discussion by rejecting pessimistic "social Darwinist" Malthusian ideas about fertility, while finding modern demand-for-labor models insufficiently nuanced to deal with their Sicilian case.

The second theoretical chapter focuses on the rapid growth phase of the European demographic transition. It leads the reader through the complex problem of relating "proximate causes" of fertility (variables such as age at marriage, contraceptive practices, breast feeding and birth interval), and mortality decline to broad ranging socio- and political-economic changes. The Schneiders conclude that it is useful to think about world-wide agricultural trends, most particularly the introduction of New World crops into Europe, inducing powerholders toward practices that affected the timing of marriages and increased the demand for labor, while at the same time reducing mortality ascribable to famine and malnutrition.

The next three chapters move from the theoretical to

the specific to discuss the case of Villamaura. An important element is the idea that a broad phenomenon, such as the European demographic transition, must be "disaggregated," by period, by place, and by social class, to understand the local unfolding of the processes involved. For Villamaura, disaggregation means understanding processes in terms of social classes–landowner and professionals, artisans, and both landholding and essentially landless peasants. Chapter Three discusses population expansion trends in Sicily in general. The authors spend the better part of Chapter Four laying out the class basis of Villamaurese society in historical perspective, and then they explain population expansion in Villamaura during the late nineteenth century, which they lay to a variety of factors including improving food supplies, better water quality and urban conditions, and pressure upon peasant worker women to cease breastfeeding so as to be able to participate in a variety of income supplementing activities, such as gleaning or making brooms at home.

Chapter Five focuses on the beginnings of population restriction in Villamaura, which took place among the higher classes, and upon emigration strategies adopted by the lower classes around the turn of the century. Higher class decisions to reverse previous positive values about large families are attributed to shaken confidence in class position stemming from a number of late nineteenth century factors, such as difficult international economic conditions during the 1890s, popular political movements like the Sicilian fasci, and some of the consequences of emigration such as labor shortages and competition with peasant properties acquired through remittances from abroad or by return migrants. Members of the *ceto civile*, as they are called in Villamaura, turned to coitus interruptus, or "reverse gear," to control their fertility. However, the Schneiders point out that civile men, unlike other men in such towns, had access to other outlets, such as servant women, to satisfy their sexual desires and could afford to obtain abortions for their wives in the city, if necessary.

Part II deals with the population contraction phase of the European demographic transition. Like the first section, it begins with an excellent multi-chapter review and critical discussion of the literature on the subject. Chapter Six thoroughly discusses the little-understood practice of withdrawal and the important role it played in European fertility reduction. The Schneiders detail its widespread use, Church attitudes about it, and gradual changes which lent it respectability among the middle classes. (Students especially enjoyed their collection of colorful folk euphemisms for the practice.) They come to agree with Foucault and Giddens that coitus interruptus, although a kind of sacrifice, also had a certain liberating effect on sexuality by hastening the detachment of sex and reproduction, and should not be seen only as an example of repressive rationality, too easily contrasted to a stereotyped irrationality on the part of those who do not practice it.

The next two chapters are also theoretical. The first deals with models of fertility decline stemming from social Darwinist and eugenicist sources, and then with work emphasizing the supposed unique, and by implication, more rational, nature of the late-marrying European family. The latter includes the European Fertility Project at Princeton, and the Cambridge Group. These essentially modernization and cultural values models are contrasted in Chapter Eight with "New Home Economics" approaches, and with institutional demography, both of which the Schneiders see as more congenial to their study. This is not surprising considering the Schneiders' early and pioneering rejection of modernization approaches in favor of political economic theory in their *Culture and Political Economy in Western Sicily* (1976). The contrasts between the modernization approaches, which essentially see "traditional" irrationality as an impediment to decreasing fertility, and approaches such as the New Home Economics, which assume that people maximize for number of children given the economic constraints and opportunities under which they live, are clearly drawn and useful for students first encountering them. However, the Schneiders find the New Home Economics, with its basis in ahistorical economic theory, less than adequate to their purposes because they argue that there are particular historical conjunctions in which rational choice making about reproduction may not be possible. Although often it is useful to think of parents making rational decisions about their fertility, people can be caught "off guard," so to speak.

The institutional demographic approach they prefer is based upon the concept of "demographic regime," defined by Phillip Kreager as "the recruitment component of social structure." Essentially this amounts to a culture of reproductive practice, and the Schneiders include within it:

...guidelines for the timing of marriage, fertility, and property transmission; for relations of age, sex, birth order, kinship, and alliance; for the permissibility or not of sex before marriage, outside of marriage, and after childbirth; for regulating adoption, emigration, and immigration; for locating sources of purity, and pollution (pp. 196-7).

Institutions having to do with these things shape family decision making about reproductive matters. The Schneiders use of this notion concords with modern anthropological practice theory notions of culture, not as a determinative set of rules, but as a set of possibilities around which strategies may be flexibly elaborated by people under particular circumstances. They sum up their approach by writing: "In contrast to the older, culturalist approach, however, institutional demographers are not fixated on local cultural arrangements as obstacles to family planning. Placing these arrangements *in* history, they render them active agents in adjusting the reproductive strategies of families to political-economic change" (p. 203). The remainder of Chapter Eight lays out the demographic regime for western Sicily.

The last chapters turn back to the story of Villamaura's demographic transition. The very rapid artisan transition took place during the years that followed World War I, and the authors ascribe it to a desire to maintain position in a society undergoing deteriorating economic circumstances. Here again coitus interruptus was the main birth control mechanism, and the Schneiders sensitively portray the differences between the demographic regimes of artisans and elites, noting that the former had companionate marriages in which there was shared decision making and a sense of shared sacrifice. Agricultural workers' lives deteriorated between the wars with troubled economic conditions, the emigration safety valve shut off, and fascist agricultural policies that strengthened latifundism. Their fertility remained high, and the Schneiders argue that a variety of circumstances caught them off guard with respect to making reproductive decisions, not least of which was a

mothers' temporary, historically conditioned, puzzlement over the coincidence of shortened birth intervals and higher child survivability, and the system of servitude to other classes which sapped the ability of both women and men to create and maintain respectable families of their own (p. 245).

Thus the Schneiders' institutional demographic approach sees people as actively creating strategies to maintain position in society, as did the elites in the nineteenth century and the artisans in the early twentieth, and they hold that much of the time, when circumstances permit, people use their cultural patrimony in such a way, making decisions rationally upon the basis of what understandings they have. But it also permits us to think of parents, under historically specific circumstances, who, for one reason or another, find themselves "at sea" with respect to effectively strategizing. This could seem to be a "culture of poverty" approach were it not that they lay strong emphasis upon the temporary and historically specific nature of this strategic paralysis.

For Villamaura's agricultural worker population, strategic paralysis with respect to family limitation ended after World War II, when a variety of factors such as land reform, emigration opportunities in Italy and abroad, and the expansion of the Italian welfare state widened their possibilities and allowed the adoption of strategies which led to the second phase of their demographic transition. Their attitudes toward family size and toward coitus interruptus changed like those of the elite and artisan classes before them.

A short final chapter summarizes the arguments and broadens them to consider briefly the hegemony of ideas about excessive fertility in "family values" ideologies found in modern Europe and the United States and "the second demographic transition," or the drift away from marriage and toward greater sexual freedom and individualism. The Schneiders assert that the latter is less pronounced in southern Italy than in other European regions.

This is a book with many strengths and negligible weaknesses. It works both as a useful and important contribution to the scholarly literature on Sicily and upon the European demographic transition, particularly because it provides a general model of fertility behavior useful for the understanding of other cases. The substantive interpretation of the transition in Villamaura appears to be reasonable and well-supported by the data presented. No less importantly, the book serves well as a vehicle for educating neophytes about theoretical and substantive issues related to demography, development, and political economy.

Reference

Jane Schneider and Peter Schneider. *Culture and Political Economy in Western Sicily.* New York: Academic Press, 1976.

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