The Determinants of Early Fertility Decline in Texas*

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This study examines the determinants of fertility control in a frontier population made up largely of German-Americans during the years from 1850 to 1910. The analysis employs a complex register of population constructed from census enumerations, civil and ecclesiastical vital registration, and tax assessment rolls. The article begins with a series of bivariate analyses with cohort of mother's birth, religion, ethnicity, and husband's occupation determining marital fertility. The second half of the paper presents a multivariate model of the determinants of fertility using these and other demographic characteristics as independent variables. The conclusions emphasize the importance of the overall trend toward fertility decline in the United States, as well as the role of religion and of occupational differences, in determining changes in fertility behavior in the population of Gillespie County, Texas.

Among the oldest subjects of debate among historians of the European demographic transition—especially as it applies to fertility—are the characteristics that distinguished different groups within a population, and the pace at which they began the process of controlling their fertility. From Louis Henry's (1956) pioneering work about the Genevan bourgeoisie to the chapters collected recently by Gillis, Tilly, and Levine (1992), it has been vitally important to explain whose fertility declined first, and why. Put simply, most of the work in this vein has attempted to show some combination of cultural and socioeconomic differences in the character and pace of fertility decline. In our reading of this literature, we take socioeconomic differences to be those which can be measured by occupation and wealth. We take cultural differences to be those not measured by occupation and wealth, especially language, religion, and religious practice. Cultural and socioeconomic differences can operate together, as shown by the work of Schneider and Schneider (1992), but they also can work separately.

In this article we attempt to show the role played by a combination of cultural and

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443
socioeconomic differences in determining the extent of fertility limitation in the subgroups of an American population. Our subject is a single county in rural Texas in the period from 1850 to 1910. Initially, in the 1840s, the population of Gillespie County was a community of German immigrants. By the early twentieth century it included a number of non-Germans in its mix of farmers and townsmen and of Catholics and Protestants. We will show that the fertility experiences of these groups differed. The identification of this variation is important because it allows us to show—although on a small scale—the role of culture and of the social and economic divisions that underlay fertility change in the United States, and possibly in Europe and elsewhere. Because of their innate diversity, even small American populations can be instructive in our study of the combined role of culture and socioeconomic factors. Few American communities had the religious uniformity found in most of their European counterparts. As we will show, substantial cultural diversity existed even in an immigrant community made up almost exclusively of German immigrants and their descendants.

In two recent works, Haines (1989, 1992), shows the differences in the pace of the fertility transition by social class, usually identified with occupational groups. Beginning with the first English analysis of fertility decline, the role of certain occupational groups in leading the decline has been apparent. Haines summarizes these occupation-specific fertility levels for a number of countries by reporting, “It appears, for England and Wales, the United States, France and Norway, at least, that fertility decline was ‘led’ by the middle and upper classes. Social and economic elites apparently did act as leaders in modifying this most basic of activities—human reproduction. In contrast, the agrarian population was slower to change” (1992, p. 224).

The meaning of the occupational differences diagnosed by Haines and others is not always clear. Some scholars have suggested that occupational differences reflect the earlier adoption by the leaders in fertility decline of a new ideology of the family, in which couples strove to provide for a smaller number of more expensive, “higher-quality” children. At least in part, Jane and Peter Schneider have challenged this interpretation of socioeconomic differences in the onset of fertility decline. In their study of a rural Sicilian town, Schneider and Schneider show that the differences between the early-decline gentry families, the middle-decline craftsman families, and the late-decline farm tenant families reflect a continuity of values over time and through the three principal social classes; they changed their behavior not so much in response to new ideas as to new economic conditions in which old values could be realized. The implication of this work is that values—culture—combine with socioeconomic differences to modify behavior.

Other approaches to the role of culture in shaping the fertility decline have separated the decline more clearly from economic change and social differentiation. That the influence of cultural change was linked with that of social and economic change was one of the compelling conclusions drawn from the Princeton European Fertility Project (Coale and Watkins 1986). Anderson relates the two crucial facts:

The Theory of the Demographic Transition does not discuss the role of regional or cultural factors in marital fertility decline. . . . However, a consistent finding of the European Fertility Project is that a large part of the decline in marital fertility cannot be explained by socioeconomic variables. Moreover, nonsocioeconomic variables, such as religion, language, ethnicity, and region, explain much of the variability in marital fertility decline, even after conventional socioeconomic variables have been taken into account (1986: 293).

Anderson’s work and that of others in the European Fertility Project, especially Knodel (1988), Lesthaeghe and Wilson (1986), and Watkins (1991), have shown the strong role of