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"They Just Happened": The Curious Case of the Unplanned Baby, Italian Low Fertility, and the 'End' of Rationality

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“They Just Happened”:

The Curious Case of the Unplanned Baby, Italian Low Fertility, and the “End” of Rationality

Even in a country with super-low fertility rates, at least one-quarter of all babies are unplanned. The finding puzzles policymakers. This article uses Italy’s “curious case” as a jumping-off point to expose assumptions about rationality. It offers a model to dismantle the “conceit” of rationality, drawing on Max Weber’s classic critique and Emily Martin’s contemporary appraisal. It asks: (1) How do assumptions about rationality related to sexuality and reproduction manifest? (2) How do qualitative data challenge rationalist assumptions? and (3) How are cultural logics expressed and what do they reveal about the “problem” of low fertility? Methodologically, the article offers an innovative approach, juxtaposing ethnographic data derived from the author’s fieldwork with startling findings from Italian researchers’ multicity project. The analysis exposes the rationality trope as a technique of governance in a context in which policymakers yearn for social cohesion and population politics intensify around birthing, immigration, and aging. [rationality, fertility, politics of reproduction, Italy, Europe]

Small families have become the norm in much of Europe. In Italy, stigma threatens those who dare to violate that small-family norm. Such sentiments and cultural logics have made themselves evident in ethnographic research on family making. Italians’ journey to lowest-low fertility and their ongoing experiences with it challenge assumptions of choice, birth control, and rational family planning. Italians have charted a unique path to this historic destination. National fertility surveys have revealed unconventional uses of birth control methods—more coitus interruptus and condoms than pill—than family planning experts would predict for a lowest-low fertility society. Numerous unplanned babies have also been reported, puzzling scholars and laypersons alike.

Despite the trends, modernization paradigms persevere, and a rational-actor model continues to dominate descriptions of fertility-related behaviors.¹ On the ground, ethnographic research reveals a somewhat different story: that in the face of an epoch that necessitates the need to be rational about reproduction, Italians use the figure of the “unplanned” baby in playful ways that suggest fissures in the rationalist paradigm. To make sense of this finding, this article revives Max Weber’s

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(1958) critical take on rationality and probes its multiple meanings in pursuit of three questions: (1) How do underlying assumptions about rationality related to sexuality and reproduction manifest in social life in a lowest-low fertility society? (2) What kinds of challenges do qualitative data—from ethnographic inquiry, interviews, and focus groups—pose to rationalist assumptions? and (3) What does this line of inquiry reveal about cultural logics and the “problem” of low fertility?

For decades, a leading assumption in the scientific literature related to family size and planning has been that women, or couples, engage in rational decision making, and that such cost–benefit analysis is essential to modern subjectivity. Furthermore, the presumption is that, of course, rational choice has manifested in a societal pattern of very small families. After all, reproductive behaviors are what manifest demographic numbers, such as fertility rates. Interpretations of these numbers have grown out of a dominant orientation toward demographic trends: that this historical shift from so-called natural fertility to controlled fertility signifies that people exercise rational and controlled behavior related to planning a family. The further assumption, logically, is that in a lowest-low fertility context people behave rationally, and more so than in a high fertility context.

The recent data should give pause. The truth of the matter may be that this narrow conceptualization of human behavior—in leaving out emotions, desires, and ideologies—exposes the limits of a paradigm. This article traces the ways in which rationality has served as a potent norm in population science. It draws on ethnographically documented social interactions to investigate and interpret cultural logics at play in this low fertility context. Finally, it explores assumptions that persevere related to rationality, how they are reproduced and resisted. The norm of rationality has been silently reliant on embodied tactics, reminding us of the utter importance of keeping the body high up on the scholarly agenda, as Margaret Lock and Judith Farquhar (2007) so eloquently remind in their volume *Beyond the Body Proper*. I undertake this inquiry mindful of Emily Martin’s wish list for future research as outlined during a plenary at the Society for Medical Anthropology meeting in September 2009. At the top of that list was the rationality–irrationality binary, which Martin (2009) nominated as a likely candidate to be the next in line to fall. She may very well be prescient.

From Weber to Martin: Throwing off “Cold Skeleton Hands”

The roots of Western thought on rationality are complex and contradictory. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to pursue a full-blown discussion of this intellectual history, I would like to emphasize that in contrast to the optimistic view of rationality as professed in modernization theory, much 20th-century social thought has taken a pessimistic view of modernity, which achieved its classic expression in Weber’s theory of rationalization. Weber criticized modernity for its defining characteristics: how calculation and control played an increasing role in social life. As editors Gerth and Mills write in an introduction to his *Essays in Sociology*, “Weber thus identifies bureaucracy with rationality, and the process of rationalization with mechanism, depersonalization, and oppressive routine. Rationality, in this context, is seen as adverse to personal freedom” (1946:50). Weber was well known for describing the tendency toward rationalization as an “iron cage

of bureaucracy.” Less well cited is his discussion of eroticism—still in the context of his ruminations on rationality.

Weber embraced a nuanced understanding of rationality. He sketched out a hierarchical scheme related to rationality, with motivated and calculated actions on one end and spontaneous actions on the other. In the hands of modernization theorists, who adhered to an evolutionary model of human social organization (see Greenhalgh 1995; Wolf 1982), each end of the spectrum became value laden: those on the spontaneous end were irrational, backward, and associated with “primitive” peoples, and those on the calculated end were rational, forward, and associated with “modern” peoples.

The value associations of this binary break down in Weber’s writings on “The Erotic Sphere,” where he delves into the tensions between sex and religion, and where he exposes his complex views on rationality: “the greatest irrational force of life,” he writes, is “sexual love” (Gerth and Mills 1946:343). Societies across time and place have sought to regulate this “irrational” force of nature, and Weber understood that there was nothing particularly natural about sexuality or eroticism long before Foucault (1978) penned his volumes on the *History of Sexuality*. Weber traces how, in the Occident, eroticism gradually turned away from “the naïve naturalism of sex,” associated with the “organic cycle of peasant life” (Gerth and Mills 1946:344). In its place, the Occident began to embrace a view of eroticism that emphasized the value of an “inner-worldly salvation from rationalization” (Gerth and Mills 1946:346), a shift he attributes to salon culture.

The relevance of Weber’s discussion emerges as he explains two competing views on the relationship between eroticism and rationality, views useful to keep in mind for thinking through family planning in the context of politicized reproduction. One view of the relationship comes, predictably so, from religious doctrine. The church, Weber reminds, gives “to man to live according to the rational purposes laid down by it . . . : to procreate and to rear children, and mutually to further one another in the state of grace” (Gerth and Mills 1946:349). At odds with the religious tact is a view of eroticism that traces its roots to salon culture, which “rested upon the conviction that inter-sexual conversation is valuable as a creative power.” The result was, Weber notes, “A tremendous value emphasis on the specific sensation of an inner-worldly salvation from rationalization” (Gerth and Mills 1946:346). He refers to this as a “joyous triumph over rationality,” a “triumph of the spirit over the body,” and “the direct fusion of the souls of one to the other” (Gerth and Mills 1946:347). Weber articulates this triumph in a passage that reveals his view of rationality, and it is well worth quoting:

This boundless giving of oneself is as radical as possible in its opposition to all functionality, rationality and generality. It is displayed here as the unique meaning which one creature in his irrationality has for another, and only for this specific other. However, from the point of view of eroticism, this meaning, and with it the value-content of the relation itself, rests upon the possibility of a communion which is felt as a complete unification, as a fading of the “thou.” It is so overpowering that it is interpreted “symbolically”: as a sacrament. The lover realizes himself to be rooted in the kernel of the truly living, which is eternally inaccessible to any rational

endeavor. He knows himself to be freed from the cold skeleton hands of rational orders, just as completely as from the banality of everyday routine. [Weber as cited in Gerth and Mills 1946:346]

This passage reminds that Weber did not glorify rationality. It was not something to be admired about the Occident but something that had to be shaken off, just as someone would have a visceral urge to shake off “cold skeleton hands” were they gripping one’s shoulders. His pessimistic view of modernity as well as its key feature of rationality has been largely ignored in the demographic transition literature where the discourse of development-as-progress resonates like a mantra. There, pessimism has been used to define those populations who do not embrace fertility decline. Ironically, pessimism has returned full throttle in the context of low fertility populations, where pronatalist discourses again come to rely on a fulcrum of rationality.

Emily Martin notes the “profound implications” of relying on a “conceit of reason,” after Ann Stoler (2004:4), who examines tactics of colonial authority. This conceit seduces people into thinking that “any institution, nation or person could be built on a structure of the rational” (Martin 2009:11). In her project to dismantle the rationality–irrationality binary, Martin critically discusses a futuristic world in which the brains of patients suffering “mental illness” are scanned and diagnosed as “bipolar brains, schizophrenic brains, or whatever,” without having to consider any subjective perspectives from the patients on their pain. She reminds of the importance of rescuing the “semiotic” and, related, of pushing the anthropological insight: “that relationships and practices imbued with meanings *are* a life lived, not merely a symptom of an underlying physical truth” (Martin 2009:10). Beneath this momentary rescue mission, however, is a core ingredient to this dismantling recipe. “We do not need to *add* emotions to rationality; we need to follow the consequences of realizing that rationality is a skeleton that has never actually lived on this earth: its ‘bones’ are made up of ‘blood,’ visceral material enlivened by ‘irrational’ emotions and sentiment” (Martin 2009:11). The rest of this *MAQ* article models how to throw off cold skeletal hands and dismantle conceit.

Exposing the Everyday in Lowest-Low Fertility

The point of departure for my inquiry is a well-known and well-monitored trend: Italy’s *bassissima*, or super-low, fertility rate. Italians reached a record low of an average of 1.2 births per woman in 1992 (Delgado Pérez and Livi-Bacci 1992), along with Spaniards, and since then their reproductive behaviors have continued to manifest similar rates, hovering between 1.18 and 1.35 (Italian National Institute of Statistics 2008), which have brought the country international attention within and beyond Europe. Behind these dismembered numbers is the interplay of modern sexual practices with the Italian nation-state’s incessant concern with its population’s reproductive practices.

To grasp the significance of the ways in which this demographic trend has been cast, this article hones in on the curious phenomenon of unplanned babies. Nation-states’ efforts to work their ideological way into bedrooms and intervene in couples’ reproductive practices amount to political deployment of gender and sexual

norms. Such deployments have a long history (see Watkins 1991, 1992) and are hardly unique to Italy or other European nation-states (e.g., Kanaaneh 2002; Russo et al. 1992; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). Neither are they homogenous within Europe. In different contexts, adults recast old meanings of having children to fit new social conditions and expectations in line with what they understand as modern social norms (see Paxson 2004). Not only do pronatalist efforts involve powerful attempts at, or at least effects on, producing European identities—and the hailed subjects that these identities entail—but they also attempt to create a responsive population that behaves in a way that would satisfy forecasts and ideologies of the nation-state. Here, I am referring to forecasts of population decline because the actual population even in Italy has continued to grow in large part because people live longer than they used to and in small part because of immigrant newcomers. If legislators and other state-making brokers decide that too few of the right babies are being born (see Joyce 2008), and certain scientists agree, then the scientists are emboldened to figure out why the trend exists and what can be done to reverse it. Intervention is implicit. And with intervention subjects are inevitably hailed. Compliance is another matter.

In Italy, noncompliance with the proclaimed demographic urgency to have more Italian babies has been labeled as pathological. Demographers, politicians, and journalists have generated a rich lexicon to describe Italian adults who are not procreating. Examples of the terms include *profound malaise* (Golini et al. 2000), *collective suicide* (Giovra 2002), and *syndrome of lateness* (Livi-Bacci 2001; Sgritta 2003). Demographer-turned-parliamentarian Massimo Livi-Bacci's (2001) rumination on whether Italy and other European countries can sustain such a historic decline describes the fertility dynamic as not only unhealthy but unsustainable. Characterizing Italians as suffering from a tardy syndrome amounts to diagnosing the dominant population as behaving in an irrational manner. Ultimately, as Chavez (2008) has shown for the United States, Castañeda (2008) for Germany, Sargent (2006) for France, Krause and Marchesi (2007) as well as Marchesi (2012) for Italy, and Johnson-Hanks (2006) for Muslim fertility, urgency is differentially directed at potential procreators. As such, the urgency itself exacerbates stratified reproduction (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995). One consequence is that discrimination inscribes itself on certain women's reproductive bodies, such as Muslim immigrants in France (Sargent 2011:192), Latina immigrants in the United States (Chavez 2004), or Chinese immigrants in Italy. Furthermore, just as Rapp (2001) has observed about the potential of scholarship on reproduction to contribute to social theory and enable a lens through which to view cultural norms, inequalities, and struggles in broad strokes, the same can be said for the case of reproduction in a low fertility context. The alarms of demographic decline resound in the key of rationality, whose chords are nationalistic and whose reverberations are racialized. This article parses how rationality is a major tactic in the game of biopolitics (see Krause and De Zordo 2012).

Methods

For 22 months in 1995–97, I collected ethnographic data in the new-moneyed, textile-intensive Province of Prato related to Italy's moment of hitting a

world-record mark of lowest-low fertility (Delgado Pérez and Livi-Bacci 1992). I returned for a postdissertation stint for four months during January–May 2004. Shorter visits (2–6 weeks) occurred in June 1999, November 2002, June–July 2006, July 2008, and February 2011. The majority of my work took place in communes some 20 kilometers (about 12.5 miles) northwest of Florence outside the Renaissance tourist belt. My research unfolded in two *comunes*, or counties, consisting of industrial and rural towns with histories of integrated agriculture and industry and formidable postwar migration from adjacent hill towns, Tuscan hinterlands, Southern Italian villages, and, more recently, non-European points of origin, most prominently China (see Bressan and Radini 2009:130–31).

To my knowledge, this project represented the first attempt to carry out ethnographic research on the demographic trend of low fertility in Europe. To grasp how people were experiencing this remarkable moment in the history of Europe, and how it was shaping new discourses and policies related to an increasingly multiethnic nation-state, I took a multipronged approach to gathering data. In *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, Bernard and Ryan identify “three broad categories of methods for collecting data about human thought and human behavior: (1) indirect observation; (2) direct observation; and (3) elicitation, or talking to people” (2010:18).

These categories are useful for reflecting on my approach and describing it. *Indirect observation* involved consulting documents and scholars, including the Italian demographer Massimo Livi-Bacci, who granted me access to the statistics department library and numerous demographic reports at the Università degli studi di Firenze. I consulted archives at both the communal as well as provincial levels with a particular focus on materials related to family making, that is, wet nurse subsidy registries, sea colony registries, and birth and census household registries. *Direct observation* consisted of casting my net broadly yet carefully in an effort to expose myself to a diverse set of perspectives about reproductive practices, children, parenting, and work–family conflicts and compromises. To that end, I conducted participant-observation in the following capacities: as an apprentice in a family sweater factory (two months) and home-based family firm (six months); as an elected parent representative of my daughter’s first-grade class (six months); as a participant in three festivals—school, community, and religious (documented in videos); as a member of a daily morning coffee group of mothers in which topics frequently turned to the “craft of motherhood” and other health-related responsibilities; as an assistant to an oral history project focusing on peasant traditions; as a volunteer in a pizzeria of a *casa del popolo*, a Gramscian-style popular association; and as an ethnographer engaged in ongoing observations and systematic recordings of daily life. Field notes were written daily, totaling 211 computer files as well as five field notebooks from the initial two years. These were subsequently coded. *Elicitation techniques* involved semistructured, tape-recorded interviews with about 30 men and women of different ages and social classes, with and without children. (A majority of the interviews were conducted with women.)

This article offers an innovative approach to analysis. It juxtaposes scientific reports with ethnographic evidence from socially occurring speech. The juxtapositions enrich interpretative analysis and expose the multiple meanings of rationality in the contemporary social context of intense population politics involving immigration, birthing, and aging.

Interlude I: Talk of “Accidents” in the Schoolyard

A towering metal gate enclosed the Tuscan schoolyard, and parents lingered outside it one chilly December day after dropping off their children. The bell marking the start of the scholastic day had just finished ringing when a black car came speeding into the parking lot. Exasperated, Elena flew out and, with her two girls scurrying behind her, blurted, “I wish it were Friday!” She waited impatiently at the locked gate.

Several moms standing near me launched into a comparison of how many kids they each had.

“You have three, don’t you?” someone asked Beatrice, a tall, slender blond dressed as though ready to entertain guests. She nodded. “My cousin thought I was pregnant with a fourth.”

Eyes shot like darts and landed on her belly.

“*Un altro?* Another?”

“No, I’m not,” Beatrice protested. “But she called me this morning saying she had had a dream that I was pregnant and that I was divorcing my husband. My husband and I are fine. ‘And *no*,’ I told her, ‘I’m not pregnant. *Va fan culo! Va fan culo!* Go screw yourself!’ I said, and I hung up.”²

Everyone laughed. Everyone likely knew why Beatrice launched into a tirade against her cousin. As a young woman, she had gotten in trouble with her in-laws. Her oldest daughter was planned, but then the second and third came within nine months of each other, at which point her mother-in-law had threatened to send her away, to separate her from her husband, to prevent more *bambini* from coming.

To have a fourth child in these parts was not a dream; it was more of a nightmare. It stirred up memories from a stigmatized peasant past, pregnant with poverty. It signified that the person, or the couple, had lost their senses. Even three children were considered a lot. Small families had long become the norm. Indeed, according to this cultural logic, stigma threatened those who dared to violate the small-family norm. Such sentiments came up repeatedly during my ethnographic research on family making. Something else came up, too: the specter of the unplanned baby.

Interpreting Planned and Unplanned Births

Italy’s journey to lowest-low fertility, and its ongoing experience with it, pushed me to examine assumptions of choice, birth control, and family planning. Italians have charted a fairly unique path to this historic destination. National fertility surveys have revealed more unconventional uses of birth control methods—more coitus interruptus and condoms than pill—than family planning experts would predict for a lowest-low fertility society.³ Numerous unplanned babies have also been reported. One survey-based study found that the rates of unplanned births in Italy are much higher than one-quarter of firstborn children, and another focus-group project found that what made parents “decide” to have their first child was a course of nondecision, of “suspended rationality.” As such, I examine local experts’ attempts not only to comprehend what motivates Italians to become biological parents but also, and in no small measure, to aid the state in its governance of sexuality toward procreative ends and ultimately to devise policies that would foster baby making.

Unplanned births in the low fertility context of Italy take on a startlingly new if ambivalent meaning. Although Italians have reported the lowest of low fertility rates in Europe over the past 15 years, they continue to surprise demographers with a high rate of unplanned births. (The Population Reference Bureau 2010 lists more than two dozen countries worldwide with total fertility rates of 1.5 or lower.) In Italy, in a national context in which population and economic forecasters view the birthrate as too low, some demographers are coming to view unplanned births in a positive light. This shift underscores how rationality morphs to serve the politics of governance.

It is important to clarify how demographers define planned versus unplanned births. A lucid explanation appears in the article “Planned and Unplanned Births and Conceptions in Italy, 1970–1995,” coauthored by three Italian demographers (Castiglioni et al. 2001). The definition hinges around intent:

Apart from the number of wanted children, each time sexual intercourse occurs the intent may be to conceive or not to conceive. The persons w who wish to conceive may or may not do so, according to fecundability (rate f). A person who does not wish to conceive may or may not, despite their wishes. The proportion of unplanned pregnancies is related to: (1) the proportion u using contraceptives; (2) the efficacy m of the methods used (where fecundability is implicitly taken into account); (3) the fecundability f for those not using any form of contraception [Castiglioni et al. 2001:209]

The authors acknowledge various limitations to distinguishing planned from unplanned incidents in survey data, which rely on retrospective questions and re-considerations. For example, an individual may construe an unplanned birth as a planned one. The authors echo another complication: “As it is widely believed, both in public opinion and in the media, that fertility can be managed, most people would be ashamed to admit that they made a mistake, not wishing to appear incompetent in the eyes of the interviewer” (Castiglioni et al. 2001:210). This statement underscores the dominance of the rationalist stance. This orientation was common to demographers as well, such as those affiliated with the Princeton Fertility Project (see Coale and Watkins 1986), wherein dichotomies between modern–rational and traditional–irrational proliferated (see Livi-Bacci 1977:244, 257; and discussions in Lehning 1995; as well as Schneider and Schneider 1991:891).

Recent scholarship in Italy reveals that the unplanned child is surprisingly common. This finding challenges assumptions of demographic transition theory with regard to the binary between “controlled” and hence “modern” fertility practices and “uncontrolled” and thus “backward” ones. A team of Italian demographers who processed data from the Fertility and Family Surveys reported that 37 percent of conceptions during the 1990s were unplanned. Among women either under 20 or over 35 years old, that number climbed to 45 percent. Not all conceptions resulted in births. In terms of births, some 26 percent of all children were unplanned, a figure based on the reconstruction of pregnancy histories of Italian women born between 1946 and 1950. The authors conclude: “some caution is urged before assuming that Italians are the masters and mistresses of their own fertility” (Castiglioni et al. 2001:230). The authors express “optimism” because unplanned births have

declined since the 1970s, yet they call for a need to reduce further unplanned events: “much still remains to be done to improve fertility control and reduce the number of unplanned conceptions and births” (Castiglioni et al. 2001:230). In other words, whatever Italians do they should be doing it in a controlled and rational way.

Another qualitative study suggests the rates of unplanned children may be even higher. The data derive from focus groups that were part of a five-city project on Italian fertility entitled “Low Italian fertility between economic constraints and value changes.” The project aimed to comprehend couples’ motivations for having a child or having more than one child. The project involved collaboration among the statistics departments of five Italian universities whose investigators drew on residents from their respective cities: Florence, Messina, Padua, Udine, and Urbino. It represented the first major qualitative effort among quantitatively oriented demographers to deepen their understanding of Italy’s fertility trends. They sought to test some of the leading hypotheses for Italy’s low fertility and to design interventions to augment births.

I hone in on the Focus City Report from researchers at the University of Padua, for the report’s clarity, its representativeness of the study, and my participation in the workshop, “The Contribution of Qualitative Studies for Understanding Family and Reproductive Behaviors,” in which I presented a paper in 2003 as the lone anthropologist and American among the Italian demographers. The authors of the Focus City Report summarize three leading hypotheses for Italy’s low fertility: persistent imbalance in gender differences; inadequate welfare system for family changes; and diffusion of new systems of materialist or postmaterialist values. Authors Stefano Mazzuco and Fausta Ongaro note the challenges: “The numerous factors at play, the complexity of the relations between the variables, and the presence of elements that are not always easy to measure make it difficult to obtain objective elements to verify the hypotheses” (2003:3; my translation).

The Focus City project embraced a qualitative approach to investigate factors possibly responsible for Italy’s low fertility rate. The specific goal of the study, as Mazzuco and Ongaro put it, was to explore the process that leads someone *a decidere*, or to decide, to have a child. The study design focused on investigating lifestyle factors such as relationship dynamics and parental responsibility, as well as on weighing costs and benefits to procreation. The study’s 84 women and men participants were required to be married with either one or three children. The average age ranged from 40 to 46 years; participants were married on average between 16.5 and 17.7 years. The study did not mention inclusion of immigrant or gay couples, for example. The presenters of various Focus City reports mentioned the value of a “homogenous” research design, implying a focus on a normative swath of society. In this sense, the study mapped normative family making in its design.

The report was organized into four sections. The first three sections explored experiences and perceptions among individuals and couples related to: a sense of personal fulfillment, the “craft” of parenting, and the costs and benefits of children. The fourth section was dedicated to policy interventions that would favor families and parenthood. “The objective here is to understand which policy initiatives, according to the participants, can render less onerous the task of parenting in Italian society” (Mazzuco and Ongaro 2003:3; my translation).

The most startling aspect of the study was the finding related to what makes parents decide to have a child. The researchers noted that from a cost benefit point of view, the focus group participants emphasized that the costs of having a child far outweighed the benefits. Hence, what made parents “decide” was a course of nondecision, of throwing caution to the wind, so to speak. Indeed, participants reported that the conceptions of most first children result from parents’ “suspension of rationality.” Focus group members said that the first child arrives “on its own” and is not the “oggetto di programmazione” [the result of planning]. The researchers conclude:

As long as one is not talking about a “contraceptive error,” the conception of the first child is attributed to a moment of *sospensione della razionalità*, or suspended rationality, because if one were to truly evaluate the consequences of the decision to become a parent, nobody would ever have children. [Mazzuco and Ongaro 2003:19; my translation]

This conclusion reveals a fascinating cultural logic at work: ordinary Italians know they are supposed to act in a rational, responsible, and calculated way when it comes to making families; however, a cost–benefit analysis appears to make bringing a baby into the world anything but rational for most Italians. Hence, if these data can be trusted, among a good swath of the married-with-children set a cultural logic of spontaneity becomes the most practiced course of action.

Recall, one of the goals of the study was not only to understand what leads parents to have a child but also to identify policies that would foster baby making. The finding puzzled the researchers. It also posed challenges. First, to encourage parents to engage in unplanned procreation would be irresponsible for a field that has long touted the merits of planning. Second, this finding flies in the face of a leading orientation of the fields of family planning and demography. The models for understanding reproductive change have long favored practices that are “rational,” “controlled,” and “planned.” Here, we have men and women, who are residents of a northern Italian city with some of the country’s lowest fertility rates, saying they did not “plan” their firstborn children. This contradicts demographic transition theory’s predictions for a low fertility society.

International scholarship on demographic transition has long been oriented along the same trajectory as modernization theory, which in turn was informed by evolutionary theory: the latter viewed social change as “unidirectional and progressive, irreversibly moving societies from a primitive to an advanced stage, making them more alike in the process,” as Greenhalgh describes in a critique of the approach (1995:6; see also discussion in Rivkin-Fish 2003:295). Even postclassic transition theories appear hard pressed to cut free from the chains of modernization theory. This in part may be because of a broad orientation of many fields, from history and geography to demography and even anthropology, to accept a “deep-rooted, often implicit belief in the historical superiority or priority of Europe over the rest of the world,” writes Greenhalgh (1995:10) in a discussion of Eurocentric diffusionism.

In the context of low fertility, the logics of cost–benefit analyses and the “calculus of conscious choice” unravel. We see an opposition between a dominant

orientation, as reflected in Castiglioni and colleagues (2001), who call for more planned conceptions and births, and Mazzuco and Ongaro, whose work implies that countering low fertility would require more instances of suspended rationality—hence more unplanned conceptions.

Granted, the authors did not call for more cases of suspended rationality; rather, policy suggestions emerging from the focus groups concerned the following: stronger cultural value placed on the family to counter rampant consumerism and unbridled extramarital temptation; better flexibility in the workplace to help people realize personal fulfillment; and improved public services, such as child care, to help couples manage their families. Couples in Italy express a strong sense of responsibility in terms of the importance of being able to guarantee a high quality of life to their children, and to provide them with their ever-changing yet “continuous necessities” (Mazzuco and Ongaro 2003:30; see also Krause 2005). Nevertheless, participants viewed economic incentives as unlikely to motivate people to have children even though everyone lamented the cost of raising a child (Mazzuco and Ongaro 2003:33). Recent reports note the serious problems young adults face in landing permanent and even paying jobs in Europe generally and Italy specifically (Donadio 2011). To explain why then Italians still have children at all, demographer Gianpiero Dalla Zuanna turns away from the “rational” explanation to acknowledge that “at some point, most people ‘feel the need’ to have children, which means investing emotions, time and money in this project” (2004:39).

Reproducing and Resisting Rationality

The recent scientific shift that characterizes lowest-low fertility as dangerous and thus irrational paradoxically echoes an old stigma, one reserved for those “laggards” who continued to have numerous offspring (see Kertzer and Hogan 1989:152). Modernization roots persist in anchoring scholars in their use of a unitary measuring stick designed to gauge middle-class rationality. Such characterizations eerily recall Banfield’s *Amoral Familism* (1958). The specter of backwardness is hard to dodge, and its lingering effects pose a challenge. The stigma suggested in the scientific nomenclature for having numerous children also appears in the course of everyday life. The sentiments that modernity produces are perhaps not so unlike resistant bacterial strains.

Anthropologists have documented the shift in dominant views toward family size drawing on historic and ethnographic data. Schneider and Schneider show for Sicilians of various social classes that by the postwar period the idea was widely accepted that having lots of children was akin to a “festival of the poor” (Schneider and Schneider 1996). The message they heard was that poor folks engaged in irrational sexual behavior because any thinking person knew that more children meant more poverty (Schneider and Schneider 1995). Sicilian artisans referred to the contracepting French as *più evoluto* (more evolved) than Italians (Schneider and Schneider 1996:223). The phrase replicates in local terms a prevailing dichotomy in demographic transition literature between backward and modern sexual practices. The backward practices were commonly associated with uncontrolled and unplanned sex, whereas the modern practices were associated with controlled and planned family making.

Similar moral ranking persists in central Italy, where unplanned births can be cause for joking behavior, on the one hand, or a source for shame, on the other hand. In the former case, unmarried couples that have a stable relationship, that have steady jobs, or that have a house ready to live in may decide to get married when they learn “they” are pregnant. Frequently, when people recalled this reason for getting married, they would laugh, saying it was “time” anyway. The implication was that the child may have been unplanned but it was not unwanted.⁴

Scholars of fertility decline have not paid much attention to joking behavior in relation to family making. The omission parallels that of social historians who studied fascism yet regarded laughter and jokes “as irrelevant,” thereby refusing such tactics and their human agents “a place in history,” writes Luisa Passerini (1986:187). Just as social historians of the working class tended to portray their subjects as the “vanguard of progress,” demographers have tended to depict postdemographic transition populations as largely rational. Yet planned children are only one aspect of fertility practices even in a low fertility society. The joking behavior about unplanned children reveals ambivalences concerning subjective, modern selves, rife with conflicting desires and yearnings, “all conformists of some conformism or another,” as Gramsci (1971:324) notes. On the one hand, there is pressure to conform to a sentiment of getting on with having children: from aging parents who long for grandchildren, from experts who circulate notions that Italians prolong adolescence to the point of pathology, and from politicians who fear the loss of Italian “culture” to immigrant others. On the other hand, there is the pressure to conform to ideas about having everything set—career, spouse, house, self—before embarking on parenthood.

Interlude II: Cultural Logics of the Unplanned

Evidence of conflicting attitudes occurred frequently during my fieldwork in Prato. An unplanned child could very well be the source of shame, ranging from mild embarrassment to profound stigma, depending on the circumstances. The phrase “incidente per corso” [a crash along the way] is a euphemistic way of saying that a pregnancy was unplanned. One man with a 12-year-old daughter and a pregnant wife used this phrase to acknowledge that the anticipated child was not planned. Standing in my friends’ sweater workshop, he averted his eyes, appearing embarrassed for having let the story slip out. Cinzia, another woman whom I interviewed when she was pregnant with her third son, experienced serious stigma from friends and relatives, who called her “half-witted.” Her and her husband’s financial situation may have also exacerbated the stigma she experienced as she had gone from steady work in a sweater factory to less stable finishing work from home and then, as that work dried up, to occasional house cleaning as her husband experienced unemployment because of mental health problems.

Unplanned children cut across social classes. At a party celebrating the first-year birthday of the son of my psychologist friend, Gabriella, several of her similarly aged, professional 40-year-old friends shared stories of having conceived their second children by accident. One woman, who claimed to have very regular menstrual cycles and who had used the rhythm method successfully for years, chalked up her

second pregnancy, nearly nine years after her first, to *volontà* (will). She thought it was “incredible” that she had ended up pregnant and attributed it to a deep desire. Gabriella confided her belief that her son, who came along five years after her daughter, was also a surprise and was something of a *desiderio inconsciente* (unconscious desire) that prevailed over her conscious fear of the health risks of becoming a mother again at 40.⁵

Interestingly, this same term was used in a different family among women who reacted to news of a relative who had become pregnant with her third child and referred to her and her husband as “incoscienti,” especially given the couple’s supposedly precarious financial situation. In this context, the term *unconscious* also takes on the meaning of *irresponsible*. A resonance of irrationality shoots through this usage.

In contrast, humor was also common. One December morning in 1996, in the piazza in front of the church of Seano, I joined five other women at the bar of the Misericordia, also known as the “priest’s bar,” because our regular meeting place, with its stylish accessories and mouth-watering pastries, was closed that day. We often convened after dropping off our children at the elementary school. This group of women became my informal advisors into the “craft of motherhood,” among other topics including local politics, body aesthetics, and sexual pleasures. They were an unlikely group given their differences in political orientation and occupations. They ranged in terms of numbers of children but also personality, skin tone, and style. Beatrice, mother of three, was a stay-at-home mom and wife of a successful accountant, a great cook, voracious reader, and elegant dresser whose politics leaned just left of center. Carlena, also mother of three including twins, finished sweaters in a home workshop; she was a natural beauty, whose manner was as gentle as her wavy brown hair, and, true to her working orientation, occupied the most left political position of the group. Elena, mother of two, had a café-latte complexion with coal black hair and a no-frills style that matched her businesswoman sensibilities—well suited for her work in the gift sector; her politics leaned right of center. Laura, also a mother of two children, had striking blond locks and Etruscan eyes, with a history of having worked odd jobs including trash hauling; her politics were cynically centrist. Finally, Teresa, mother of one, peddled used clothes in the international market, hailed from Lombardy, and spoke with a Germanic cadence; she boasted of a portrait of Mussolini on her mantle, unashamed of her far-right leaning politics.

That morning, Beatrice peeled off her leopard-patterned coat, exposing gold bracelets that dangled at her wrists. We got talking about motherhood and birth spacing. She recounted how only one of her three children was planned, and the others teased her.

“Boy, don’t you learn?” joked Elena, her business sense coming through. “Enough is enough!”

Beatrice was quick with a comeback. “I would have been more than happy with one.”

“The first was planned, the second just happened,” Laura confessed, snug in her sweats.

Carlena chimed in of her twins: “They just happened.”

“We decided and then boom!” smiled Elena, decisive as usual.

The conversation provoked advice. My own daughter was six at the time, and the women urged me to stick with the one child even though she was begging for a sibling. “She’s so big now,” Elena counseled. “I wouldn’t do it . . . of course, if it happened, that’s another thing, but otherwise, no way!”

Exceptions to the small family norm did exist. Carlena said there was someone in Carmignano who actually had five, or maybe even six, children, but she was “part of some religious organization.”⁶

Taken together, such playful uses of unplanned-baby talk blur binary interpretations of agency, that is, of whether people are resisting or conforming, in this case, to dominant rationalist norms about family planning. The fact that there is so much talk surrounding transgressions of rational reproduction suggests two contradictory possibilities. On the one hand, the presence of family-planning discourse serves as evidence that rational planning is a widely accepted norm. Thus, references to “unplanned babies” do not so much challenge the norm but are a product of it. On the other hand, the playful quality of the talk deserves attention. The teasing and joking behavior is ripe with polyvocality. The playfulness reveals “sideward glances” (after Bakhtin 1980), moments in which speakers experience internal conflict. Sentiments and ideologies clash: passion versus rationality, acting on desire versus being in control. The moments point to subjects’ negotiation of dominant expectations concerning modern sexual subjectivities. Indeed, the playful talk of unplanned babies reveals how people shimmy within the dominant, rationalist paradigm, which has the moral backing of a pronatalist state.

The Axis of Rationality

Rationality has been a potent norm at work in population science. Indeed, assumptions about rationality proliferate in the writings on demographic transition, the dramatic decline in the rates of births and deaths that began all over Europe between the mid-1700s and the early 1900s. One way to understand rationality is to trace its occurrence in the context of both high and low birthrate populations—those known as pre- and post-transition societies.

Are there parallels between the ways rationality is used in discourses of “over-” and “under-” population science? A close reading of the two suggests that the use of the concept of rationality in overpopulation literature persists in underpopulation literature. I suggest that rationality endures not as a static, universally defined concept but as one that morphs to serve the politics of rational governance (Foucault 1991). This morphing serves the needs of an ongoing war of position à la Gramsci vis-à-vis moral precepts related to the nation and its citizens’ sexuality.

In their investigations of “overpopulation,” demographic scientists have used two dominant models: culturalist and economic. Rationality has served as the fulcrum for both, as Peter Schneider and Jane Schneider explain (1995). These models have been in tension with one another. The economic models were built on modernization theories that proposed a linear evolutionary trajectory of development (see Greenhalgh 1995). Proponents of culturalist models wrote against modernization assumptions, viewing them as ethnocentric. Meanwhile, users of the culturalist model used a static concept of culture and reproduced binaries central to the very modernization theory they set out to critique.

The culturalist model hinges on straightforward rationality. The adherents of this approach, sometimes called diffusionists because they see the mechanisms of modernization as shifting the ground on which people conduct their affairs, view a shift from a nonrational time where custom ruled to a modern moment when people used their rational minds to arrive at decisions and hence controlled their family size (Johnson-Hanks 2008). In this framework, “culture” is reified as a set of values or orientations that explain the onset or delay of fertility decline. The proponents of this model have been most likely to use culture as a gloss for “tradition.” As these scholars have sought to explain demographic change, they have commonly viewed culture as sets of static norms and conventions, often associated with religion. The mainstream form of the culturalist model appears in Princeton University’s European Fertility Project. Its participants tended to attribute fertility “laggards” to “traditional cultural norms” (Kertzner 1995). These norms blinded specific populations from embracing “‘rational’ fertility control” (Schneider and Schneider 1995:180). The implication has been that such people failed to bring fertility “within the calculus of conscious choice,” in the words of Princeton demographer Ansley Coale (1973; see also Schneider and Schneider 1995:181). For the culturalists, rationality explains baby making. Simply put, those men and women who have it, make small families, and those who don’t, cling to their traditions and have big families.

Proponents of the economic model have also relied on rationality but with a twist. These scholars have sought to demonstrate that high fertility is not irrational; rather, people exercise rational choice whether they have lots of children or very few children. They maintain that those couples that have large families have sound, rational cost–benefit reasons for doing so. Mead Cain, for example, demonstrated the labor–value benefits for having large families in Bangladesh, and when the labor from additional children did not improve the parents’ material standards of living, he argued that the analyst also had to include potential economic benefit, in other words, the value of children as insurance against future risks, such as parental ill health or aging (Cain 1977, 1983; see also Schneider and Schneider 1995:183). Economic models of fertility behavior regard children as materially beneficial to parents. Rationality remains key. As the Schneiders note of the model, “its fulcrum is the parents’ rational approach to reproduction” (1995:183).

The Schneiders have challenged both of the aforementioned approaches in their political economy method of explaining how different socioeconomic groups confront family making. Their tactic brings power, sentiment, and meaning into the analytic frame, revealing how material conditions interact with ideology in ways that cannot simply be explained through a binary of rational–irrational, or modern–progressive versus traditional–backward. In the Sicilian town they call Villamaura, the poorest southern Italian peasants and day laborers were last to make the move toward small families not because tradition held these people back but because dire socioeconomic conditions limited the possibilities for realizing respectability; it became important to otherwise humiliated men to affirm their masculinity through reproduction (Schneider and Schneider 1995:200).

This critical position has inspired some new work among cultural anthropologists. (See D’Aloisio 2007 for a contemporary Italian approach to reproductive behavior that considers the play of historical influences, values, and ideologies.) But it has not lit a fire to the models. Dichotomies die hard. Johnson-Hanks (2008:306)

reiterates the prevalence of rationality in a review essay: whether the theorists take the microeconomic or diffusionist perspective on fertility shifts, their explanations revolve around rationality. Indeed, policymakers and scientists tend to cling to modernization paradigms and insist on rational subjects. Perhaps this should come as no surprise. After all, unplanned births in the overpopulation literature have been stigmatizing markers of irrationality and backwardness for the reproducing subjects involved.

The case of China's one-child policy offers a concrete example of the significance of unplanned births. Looking to China is relevant for three reasons. First, as a counterpoint: China's fertility decline was the result of social engineering, whereas Italy's was the result of social conformity. Second as a connection: the largest immigrant group in Prato hails from China, and a great deal of attention has been placed of late on the rate of foreign births there. A newspaper reported in January 2011 that a Chinese mother in Prato gave birth to Italy's first baby of the New Year and went on to note that at the hospital of Prato foreign mothers' births at 51 percent exceeded those of Italian mothers (Nencioni 2011; see also La Nazione 2008). Third, as a demonstration: the one-child policy produced the "danger-fraught category" of the unplanned child, revealing how fragile rationality can be as a tactic of governance.

Birth planning in China became a prime strategy for economic development, modernizing, and "raising the quality of the people" (Anagnost 1995:26). Although Fong (2002) demonstrates how the one-child policy has empowered urban daughters who no longer have to compete with male siblings, Greenhalgh (2003) convincingly describes dire effects: on Chinese parents who deliver an unplanned child as well as on the baby who was unplanned and hence becomes a "black" person. Not only is the unplanned child "the sign of backwardness, the obstacle that keeps China from attaining its rightful place on the world stage," but he or she is an "illegal infant bereft of benefits" (Greenhalgh 2003:196, 199). In other words, the child has an illegitimate status as a person and is excluded from the household registration system. Greenhalgh observes: "unplanned or black persons are without doubt marginal members of society who lack full citizenship rights, including access to schooling, jobs, housing, and a host of other state-supplied benefits" (Greenhalgh 2003:199). The effect of "rational planning" reveals its irrational, unpredictable, inhumane underside (see Greenhalgh 2003:205; Hall 1992).

In contrast, postwar Italy did not have a population policy, in fact consciously so against the heavy-handed pronatalist campaigns of Mussolini that had left Italians largely suspicious of state efforts to intervene in their sexual and procreative lives;⁷ nevertheless, having fewer children became solidly hegemonic among the masses. Aggregate figures show that between 1961 and 1981, total fertility rates in Italy went from 2.41 to 1.60 children per woman, falling to 1.25 by 2001. Estimates were for the rate to reach 1.35 by 2006 (Italian National Institute of Statistics 2008:3). Prevailing attitudes toward an ideal family size of two children have been well documented; that these ideals remain unrealized feeds the way in which experts depict the practices of would-be parents. The modern-tradition binary continues to proliferate in the population science literature even where fertility is low. In some ways this is no surprise. Social theorists such as Weber (1958) viewed rationality as a defining feature of modernity. It takes analytic work to make fissures evident.

Conclusion: A Breaking Point in the Rationality–Irrationality Binary?

Perhaps we have reached a breaking point in the rationality–irrationality binary. First, in the Italian context, choosing to have a child in light of material and emotional investment becomes not a case of reproductive rationality but instead an instance of “suspended rationality”—and one that reveals ambivalent if not conflicting desires of the modern self. The researchers, nevertheless, ignored these limits and recommended policies to encourage decisions to have more children thereby sticking to the storyline of conception as rational and planned.

Second, one cannot resist the temptation to underscore an irony pertaining to a country whose demographic shifts came about largely through “traditional” methods of contraception. As Elise Andaya (2009:3) points out, “arguably coitus interruptus and condoms require more conscious, or ‘rational,’ control—the mastery of the mind over the body, as the Schneiders have argued in the Sicilian context—to interrupt the flow of a romantic encounter.”

Third, given the evidence of widespread unplanned babies, the persistence of the rationality trope becomes exposed as a technique of governance designed to promulgate an ideology that hails European subjects as modern so as to demarcate the lines between them and non-Europeans, whose relatively small numbers (after Appadurai 2006) are depicted as a challenge to national stories of homogeneity and yearnings for social cohesion.

Notes

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1. See Gribaldo and colleagues (2009:554) for a similar and simultaneous observation. Their approach also writes against the rational actor framework as it grapples with understanding the prevalence of nontechnological contraceptive use among Italians.

2. From author’s field notes, December 16, 1996.

3. A team of Italian demographers who analyzed data from the Fertility and Family Surveys noted that Italy had the highest use of what are considered “natural” or “traditional” family planning methods (esp. coitus interruptus and condoms) as opposed to “modern” methods (pill, IUD, sterilization; see Castiglioni et al. 2001). The survey of

current contraceptive methods in Italy revealed that 25 percent of respondents practiced withdrawal, whereas in France that figure was only 3 percent. Natural family planning was not remarkably different, at 5 percent and 6 percent respectively for Italy and France. Condom use was remarkably different, at 28 percent for Italians vs. 7 percent for French, and modern methods were also drastically different, with 42 percent of Italians as contrasted with 84 percent of French saying they used the pill, IUD, or sterilization. As Castiglioni and colleagues put it, “the similarity in the proportion of unplanned events in Italy and France is surprising given the wide difference in birth control methods used” (2001:212). They offer several explanations for the “relatively low level of unplanned births and conceptions in Italy”—low, that is, considering the lack of “modern” contraceptive methods, although relatively “high,” I would add, given Italy’s record-low fertility rates. They note a “*high efficiency of coitus interruptus and/or natural methods*, particularly when used by couples married for several years” (Castiglioni et al. 2001:213; on the skilled practice of coitus interruptus among Sicilian artisans, see also Schneider and Schneider 1991). The longer the couples are together, the more effective the methods become. The authors suggest this is particularly true in Southern Europe, where couples emphasize responsibility toward their children and where they must adopt effective strategies “to ensure that their children suffer no deprivation following a new arrival” (Castiglioni et al. 2001: 213).

4. For a discussion of the distinction between different types of unplanned pregnancies, those that are unwanted and those that are mistimed, see Castiglioni and colleagues (2001:210).

5. From author’s field notes, March 16, 1997.

6. From author’s field notes, December 16, 1996, and December 18, 1996.

7. For historical work documenting the fascist pronatalist campaign see de Grazia (1992), Horn (1994), Ipsen (1996), Passerini (1987), and Snowden (2006).

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