The Procreative Ethic in Trans-Public Discourse

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Abstract:

Transnational public policy networks (TPPNs) continue to exert wide-ranging influence over the development of population control policy at the domestic/state level. It has therefore become vital to analyze the structural form of TPPN mobilization discourses that create new values, reinforce particularistic normative interests and recast old paradigms to make them hold across frontiers in an era of globalization phenomena. Two broad discourse categories suggest themselves upon close examination of TPPN behavior. These have arisen in the wake of empirical crises in the erstwhile dependency theory dominated approach to contextualizing international connections to domestic policy development. The first is based on a human development/”quality of family life” platform, but only nominally, since it foundationally derives from a shaky coalition between an anti-liberal agenda and a reproductive rights logic. This anti-natalist camp competes with a pro-natalist movement boosted by new demographic shifts across Western Europe, STD epidemics in the developing world, and resultant accentuated convergences along the global north-south contour. My prediction is that as the polarization of transnational activity intensifies, domestic agencies will be constrained by their increasing dysfunctionality in addressing population-developmental issues. The individual citizen and her civil freedoms to tailor her sexual behaviour taking into consideration all relevant factors will end up the main casualties. In the South especially, notwithstanding increasing civil liberation across the private domain, reproductive freedoms will continue to suffer from organized apathy.

1. Introduction (Theoretical Frameworks)

Luke and Watkins (Luke and Watkins, 2002) refer to Nadelman’s (Nadelman 1990) demonstration of a ‘transnational moral entrepreneurship’ that facilitates a flow of normative resources across international supply chains dominated by actors the majority of whom have no obvious motivation to cooperate.

In many ways, Nadelman succinctly captures the essential elements of a transnational public policy network. Taking population control as an instance, TPPNs conceive of traditional international frameworks based predominantly on a state-centric logic and backed up by positivist norms as highly inefficient proceduralised processes with little promise of success in tackling a situation that – due, among others, to migration, value transfer and institutional internationalization - is fundamentally global. TPPNs may co-opt traditional actors, even ally with them, but they are under no illusion that their interests converge with such agents. Far from it, sometimes, the very rationale is to get chain actors to accomplish goals that are inimical to the latter’s own agenda.

Mirroring their attitudinal flexibility, TPPN form and make-up are often also fluid. They need not be quasi-institutionalised groups such as the World Social Forum or the Bilderberger organization. What they all have in common however is a commitment to operationalising belief systems and a shared focus on dynamic ends (Reinicke, 1998; Rischard, 2001). As value trusts, their role is to cartelise value enterprises offering complementary moral products, and hence enhance their collective bargaining power in the global marketplace of ideas. To reiterate, therefore, the following analysis of trans-public discourse should not be deemed as limited in focus to such quasi-institutionalised groups such as Population 2005, the European Demographic Research Ensemble or Population Action International; for important though all these networks are, they do not encompass the totality of international advocacy.
No attempt will be made to enunciate a rigid set of criteria to define TPPN membership, given their essential amorphosity, nor will much effort be expended at all on detailing their organisational ethoses, but it is hoped that in the course of the following discussion, a certain intuitive understanding will develop about how loosely coordinated advocacy systems "collaborate" successfully to forge powerful discourses that impinge on, in this case, local population policy.

2. The Old Radicalism

When Duff Gillespie describes the influence of the United States over global reproductive health resources, particularly in relation to reproductive development assistance to poorer nations, as "hegemonic", he is echoing a standard refrain of classical dependency theory as applied to population studies. Until very recently, the notion that global responses to perceived demographic crises reflected international power relationships between dominant and subservient state/sub-state actors was the most widespread in the literature. What remains today of this critical perspective, by no means dismissible (as is evident from Gillespie's recent paper), is closely allied to constructivist critiques of international capital's complicity in what Kuumba laments as a "reproductive imperialism" rooted in a neo-Malthusian intellectual matrix. According to the critique, the ethnic subjugation of women in both hemispheres, the selective reduction of population growth and the continued marginalisation of subjects in the developing world are all evidence in support of the view that population dynamics are merely symptomatic, rather than causal, elements within the wider socioeconomic context. Thus they should be addressed only as part and parcel of broader social equity contexts. At an even more empirical level it is suggested that the underlying motivations of policy are all tied directly to the importance of cheap labour pools in the global capital-dominated economy.

The analyses have consistently followed discursive trends in the general developmental debate, with the tone occasionally bordering on the swiftian. The Cairo process has been denounced, Bucharest repudiated, and major international organisations such as the UNFPA, WHO and FAO accused of suffering from neo-Malthusian syndromes.

To be candid, it is becoming increasingly evident that radical approaches that derived their ammunition from the dependency theory arsenal have long been waning in persuasive influence. They have followed the sustained hollowing out of the dependency critique within general developmental theory following the mounting stacks of "anomalies" being observed in the developmental paradigms of so-called newly-industrialising countries and transitional economies – such as the merging of core with periphery in the international division of labour- when they are viewed through prisms of standard critical theory.

I will therefore concentrate on emergent mobilisation discourses that spot some of the features of dependency theory but also of the earlier anti-natalist discourse developed from 60s era modernisation doctrines about social stability and purposive cohesion (Huntington 1957, 1968; Talcott Palsons).

3. New Empirical Realities

Jonathan Swift in his A Modest Proposal, 1729, satirically advocated infant cannibalism as a way of addressing chronic want.
A report by the Catholic New Agency ZENIT in 2002 devotes substantial attention to the efforts of the UN population Division and its Head, Dr. Joseph Chamie. Said report was critical of the latter and his organisation for sustaining, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, the notion that global fertility reduction was an issue of pressing importance due to the threat of overpopulation. The next year, another body, the Global Catholic Network, accuses the USAID of awarding ‘multi-million dollar grants’ to promote homosexuality across South and Central America, and Africa, when those amounts could have gone to social projects. FHI, an international NGO, is singled out as having been an enthusiastic vehicle for these aims.

Beyond the polemic, however, these reports raised an interesting issue that has become a mainstay of the empirical resurgence leading the charge in the new pro-natalist drive. The issue is the accumulating projections in demographers' cabinets pointing to the possibility of fertility rates falling below replacement level in developing countries, instead of stabilising at said level. Should this be true, it will imply a convergence of macro-societal shifts between the developed and developing worlds and undermine any absolute notion of different challenges requiring different remedies. The concern would then, appropriately, become how best to reverse the "inverse-pyramidisation" of the demographic structure of economies such as could potentially see less people in work than retired toiling endlessly to replenish fast depleting social security troves. Seeing then that this is a question of social equity, though not exactly in the form often posed by "progressives", it will behove on policy makers to encourage by means of regulation and incentive childbearing and motherhood.

In so far as economic conditions differ across the North-South contour, it is acknowledged that policymakers will have different quantities of resources of different quality at their disposal. But this once again is a matter of social equity not of fundamental problem structure. That the equity challenge is global suggests precisely why it is a matter for trans-public discourse.

ZENIT is of course a Catholic establishment, and no doubt plays a role in the worldwide Catholic value network. The global distribution of Catholicism is such that its most active segments are located in the Global South. The Church therefore has a clear interest in how global policy conforms to moral dogma, but an equally strong one in issues of poverty and development.

It is here however that we must exercise caution. For trans-public discourses are never homogeneously nurtured. To see direct, isolable, relationships between actors and vocabulary choice is to miss the primacy of discourse over actor, and thus the gelling role the former plays in uniting otherwise disparate institutional viewpoints onto common platforms.

It is intriguing to see how the commentary given by Austin Ruse in said report urging a shift of focus from population control as a self-sufficient policy realm to wider social equity issues, finds near-identical replication in the position of the Indian think tank, Ansaar-Us-Sunnah Library and Research Centre concerning homosexuality. The Centre is of the view that to obscure important social issues regarding development, the U.S. and international agencies were instead massively promoting homosexuality to act as a curb on population growth. A certain Frederick Jaffee, an executive of international NGO Planned Parenthood, is singled out for especial rebuke in this regard.

Azrina Sobian, a Research Officer at the Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM), also implicate international agencies in a supposed international drive to promote homosexuality
as a means of population control, the original intent being a desire to shirk social responsibility\textsuperscript{vii}. The IKIM is of course a government rather than an independent organisation; but it nevertheless is known for its closeness to regional civil society.

That no international agency or organisation advocates the use of homosexuality as a population regulation mechanism is of course not the main issue. The important point is firstly, how a pro-natalist discourse has been engineered employing social and cultural normative strands usually resident in other dimensions to augment persuasion and enhance mobilisation. A more intriguing, and not surprisingly more controversial, notion will be to see how such discourses from actors with different agenda at the global level – the anti-Americanism of Ansaar-Us-Sunnah, Catholic concerns of doctrinal purity in its Southern stronghold and the regionalist Islamo-social concerns of IKIM- reinforce each other through a performative intersection in the vocabulary, the pre-eminence of social equity, in this instance.

But we must look for the bridge of convenience that allows opportunistic convergence amongst discourse networkers without which the use of common vocabularies could be risky given the deep ruptures on other issues. We find one for the “social equity first” discourse by identifying the chief legitimating instrument: new demographic evidence suggesting a convergence of fertility decline across the North-South contour. The fertility decline evidence does not of course stand alone in explicating the demographic convergences. Massive multi-stage migrations, extensive rural-urban drift and the breakdown of cultural institutions have all played their part.

In the above light, it becomes obvious how sexual behaviour and population policy can be inextricably interlinked, situated in a socio-economic framework and systematically orientated in such a manner that both rationality and compassion point in the direction of pro-natalism. The \textit{trans-public discourse network} consequently assembled has a reality unencumbered by pluralisms existing within and between diverse publics. Which is how it can salvage waning dependency logics and supply them with much more effective form and content, but also why, in doing so, it proves the primacy of discourse by allying with usually anti-conservative social activists relying on narrow points of detail.

4. Discourse Resilience

Insofar as pro-natalists define themselves by their opposition to the activities of governments, inter-governmental agencies and international bodies involved in international population policymaking, it will appear that the task of elucidating the thrust of the anti-natalist consensus in the current era is cut out for us.

Alas, not so simple; at least not at the level of public or trans-public discourse. For a start, no clear, sustained, effort seems to be made to separate contraception as an epidemic-containing mechanism from its usage as a fertility control agency, leading to distortions on the planes of analysis.

But the crucial point is something else: the transformation of the vocabulary of the anti-natalist discourse in keeping with general trends of advocacy in general developmental activism. It will seem that a self-serving binary logic is in operation and has led to the aggregation of progressive viewpoints on the anti-natalist side simply as a means of consistent differentiation from usually “conservative” voices who have now adopted the tone of erstwhile radical “anti-imperialists”.
Gender-specific healthcare and deprivation is posited as inseparably bound with fertility control. But even more importantly they are not defined in isolation from "social contexts". Child abuse and neglect, family instability and feminine empowerment are all features of a new framework being built to better position advocacy of fertility controls on the more convenient banks of the compassionate rationality stream. Of interest is the many thematic elements borrowed from erstwhile "conservative" dogma-sets to serve a purely "liberal" cause. But the line of reasoning that "planned" families produce better-adapted, socially receptive, children will not be out-of-place in the vocabulary of a Chinese population bureaucrat either. It is not entirely clear whether the proponents of such teleologies recognise an implicit identification with a long-defunct modernist monologue, one that is famously illustrated by this statement attributed to Reimert Ravenholt, a 60s era Director of the USAID: "I'm very strongly opposed to poor people sort of willy nilly producing beyond their capacity and then turning to their neighbors and saying, 'you have to take care of these offspring because I can’t …". This is of course a trivial question as it derives from an erroneous assumption that discussants are tied unilinearly, rather than nodally, to their discourses.

What is certain about the shifting patterns of pro-natalist discourse is that it is also indicative, like the new anti-natalism, of the pre-eminence of discourse. And given the relatively more institutionalised nature of anti-natalist trans-public discourse, it is easy to imagine how nurtured themes in one realm can migrate through advocacy pipelines across the global policy communicative sphere.

Of course, the days of Erlich (Erlich, 1968), The Meadows, Randers and Behrins III (Meadows and Meadows, Randers and Behrins, 1972) will not return to allow the nurturing of parsimonious debates about shortfalls in planetary capacity for the reclamation of the rational-compassionate highground, but that will only have posed a problem were the actors the primary agents in discourse-construction.

5. Conclusion (Predictions)

The procreative ethic has proved itself capable of self-perpetuating only as a polarising binary. A strong and powerful binary sure, but a static binary nevertheless. Trans-public actors have shown a remarkable willingness to circulate around the poles of discussion making up their stances as they go along. The result has been an encroaching sprawl of self-legitimating pseudo-universalist discourses that bestride what should be policy areas important in their own right, and defined in response to specific contexts.

The freedoms of sexual behaviour belong to a Human Rights framework and ought to be addressed with vocabularies best suited to that framework. They certainly, like every sector of the human sphere, do not inhabit fully insular provinces of social construction, but they are nevertheless ideational forces which operate in ways that are distinct from the ideological currents that suffuse policymaking in other areas of social and political economy.

Eberstadt (Eberstadt, 1994) is right in his formulation regarding the ideological swamping of reproductive rights debate, but succumbs to the syndrome he himself diagnoses in the course of his analysis. What is clear however is that the intensifying push for human rights notwithstanding, no mobilisation is underway, except amongst a few fringe domestic civil societal groups, in the South to affirm the inclusion of sexual/reproductive justice into the
civil rights momentum. Homosexuality, to name but one sexual justice issue, remains criminalised throughout most of Africa\(^2\) and in many parts of Asia. The issue of same-sex civil unions in many parts of the Global North continue to be cast in ideological moulds that have little direct affinity with the more fundamental aspects of the debate.

At the domestic level, in particular, in places like Africa, debates, such as that over abstinence which at the local level is a straightforward cultural issue, have become ideologically polarised through refraction across trans-national value mediums leading to the transfer of power at the domestic level to actors who have little real expertise or ability to discern between public health, cultural preservation, fertility regulation and human reproductive rights logics within public policy making. Technocrats and specialists in civil society on the ground and close to the salient matters have been constantly marginalised. Where political interventions have been broached, as was the case in Cameroon recently\(^3\), they have been merely at the populist discourse level, designed solely to maximise power transfer using the last remaining human security/development institution non-policing via international human rights convergences - sexuality.

When Steven Mosher writes that Ghanaian women have shown through surveys that they have zero interest in ‘‘reproductive healthcare’’\(^{xii}\), he is not relaying a fact, but nurturing a reality for superimposition over domestic contexts. He is defining a trans-public stakeholder audience for domestic political actors. Given the inefficiency of accountability at the supra-national level, given the entrenchment of discourse at the expense of actor responsibility, and seeing how fast policy-making is migrating from the local to a global polity that is convulsed in ideological seizures, one suspects a ‘‘cold war scenario’’ in which political intervention at the local level, most especially in the Global South, will be externally legitimated for cynical, even if usually subtle, internal suppression of vital reproductive rights issues in favour of discursive reverberations of trans-national inconsequentialities.

I predict the continued mass production of organised apathy about reproductive rights in the poorest nations of the world.

NOTES

\(^{i}\) Duff, G. Gillespie, Whatever Happened to Family Planning and, for That Matter, Reproductive Health? International Family Planning Perspectives © 2004 Alan Guttmacher Institute


\(^{iii}\) Bondestram, 1980; Hartmann, 1995; Kuumba, 1996.

\(^{2}\) Cameroon is typical of many African states, where indulging in homosexual acts carry a sentence of up to five years, that continue to struggle with the exact framing of sexual justice in the socio-political and legal polities. See The Namibian, November 15, 2005, edition.

\(^{3}\) In which a prominent newspaper editor was jailed after publishing names off an alleged register of homosexuals at the highest levels of government. Sexual preference is increasingly being employed as a means of political manipulation, consent-fabrification and coercion. This works to entrench the discourse in contexts far removed from human rights discussion.

v Global Catholic Network - Washington, DC, Aug. 5 (Population Research Institute/CWN); 5-Aug-2003 -- EWTNews Brief.

vi www.allaahuakbar.net, page called on 21/07/2006. The following statements are attributed to Jaffee: "encourage increased homosexuality...compulsory abortion for out-of-wedlock pregnancies...compulsory sterilization of all who have two children except for a few who would be allowed three...childbearing confined to only a limited number of adults...payments to encourage abortions."


ix China’s State Birth Planning Commission 2000 decision and 2001 law. Improving Institutional design to better reflect the state’s goals of limiting population growth while stressing the rights of citizens to reproductive services but maintaining absolute limits of their freedoms to choose, are officially the main motivations. However, textual emphases on ‘*quality*’ of natal outcomes have prompted concerns about a eugenicist logic (Yu Lu and Liu 2001).

x In an interview with Dublin Evening News in 1977.

xi See also Archbishop Curtiss of Omaha, Nebraska letter to the August 11, 2000 edition of the Catholic Voice, the city’s archdiocesan newspaper, detailing the ideological framework of pro-natalism.

xii What African Women Want (not "Reproductive Health Care") by Steve Mosher The author is the president of Population Research Institute, 2001. I am unable to locate empirical evidence in support of this.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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