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Demographic Discourse and Cultural Struggles of
Gender, Race, and Class in Italy**

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“Empty Cradles” and the Quiet Revolution: Demographic Discourse and Cultural Struggles of Gender, Race, and Class in Italy

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The current record-low birthrate of Italian women has generated lively debate about the future of the nation. In Italy, the average number of children per woman has arrived at around 1.2, a level “likely the lowest ever documented in the history of humanity for a large-scale population,” according to one Italian demographer (Golini et al. 1995:1; Istituto Nazionale di Statistico [ISTAT] 1996b). A paradox has arisen in the midst of Italians practicing what demographers claim is the lowest-ever national fertility level: as the rest of the world worries about overpopulation, Italy and many other European countries sound alarms about below-replacement fertility levels (Anagnost 1995; Bongaarts 1998; Sen 1997).¹ This article examines the social context related to the current demographic situation in Italy and has three objectives: (1) to expose the strategies demographers use to frame the birthrate in Italy as a “problem” and to argue that this exercise of scientific authority has powerful and hegemonic consequences in terms of producing demographic knowledge that extends beyond the field of demography; (2) to suggest that this knowledge is integral to a politics of cultural struggle that portrays men and, in particular, women as irrational family-makers; and (3) to argue that this instance of demographic science contributes to an alarmism that enables an “elite” sort of racism toward immigrant others.

I argue that Italian women’s record-low fertility is not merely fact but fodder for a politics of cultural struggle related to the so-called quiet revolution. This terminology begs clarification. First, I use the term *cultural struggle* because I wish to draw attention to a politics situated in quotidian social life in which rules of “normalization” are defined and codified through discourse and practice. Indeed, cultural struggle is another way of talking about hegemony;² it is another way of talking about the way in which certain ideas and actions come to be considered normal and others as abnormal and even threatening to the reproduction of the social order. To this end, I aim to unveil how a society’s

commentary on a particular practice links to ideologies of gender, class, and race. Specific reproductive practices have resulted in a downward shift in aggregate births. The documentation of this reproductive pattern has created a discursive site, for the authoritative knowledge of demographers has made the birthrate “knowable” and subject to further commentary by the media and non-experts experiencing the phenomenon in their own lives. Therefore, I show how using fertility decline as a discursive site yields insight into how relations of power are reproduced.

Second, I deploy the term *quiet revolution* to describe the process of rapid and comprehensive fertility decline that began in 19th-century Europe. It also refers to the more recent fertility declines of the 1970s–90s, and serves as a reminder of the processes of contestation underlying those declines. I first came across the term in a volume edited by historians Gillis, Tilly, and Levine, who used it to underscore the “great social changes” directly related to the declining rates at which whole populations were producing children (1992:xii, 1). I expand on their work by extending the revolutionary dimension of the metaphor. What qualifies something as a revolution? Can there be such a thing as a quiet revolution? Eric Wolf’s perhaps by-now forgotten insight from *Peasant Wars* offered an understanding of peasant rebellions as “parochial reactions to major social dislocations” (1969:265). A key characteristic of a revolution, for Wolf, was the way in which the spread of the market had “torn men up by their roots, and shaken them loose from the social relationships into which they were born” (1969:295).

Such major changes in the organization of the polity and economy resulted in imbalances that required people to seek new approaches to living. These adjustments were not merely functional but involved culturally informed negotiations within fields and relations of power. In northwestern Tuscany, where I spent 22 months conducting ethnographic and archival research, the onset of fertility decline dates back to the turn of the 20th century, and in part my project sought to grasp how peasant workers there experienced fertility decline.³ Piedmont, Liguria, and Tuscany were the regions in Italy “showing the earliest and most rapid decline,” writes demographer Massimo Livi-Bacci (1977:68). Overall fertility by 1900–02 had declined 15 to 20 percent, and by 1910–12 marital fertility had dropped 25 percent in these regions (Livi-Bacci 1977:68). The large patriarchal sharecropping family that once dominated the social landscape of rural Tuscany was entering its final chapter as couples began to have far fewer children than their parents had, and as those children increasingly sought ways of making a living that distanced them from the land and its nobility. I suggest, after Wolf, that they and their descendants were responding to an “overwhelming societal change” that involved a wholesale transformation from an economy centered around peasant sharecropping, artisan stone masonry, straw-hat weaving, and state-subsidized wet-nursing to one dominated by textiles and woollens connected to the eventual postwar boom and the nearby industrial district of Prato.⁴

I wish to show that although the quiet revolution began in a much earlier era and context of adjustment, its repercussions continue well into the present. The cultural politics of population are ongoing, and the knowledge demographers produce and, with the help of the media, circulate in society concretely informs ideologies related to gender, class, and race/ethnicity. My case demonstrates how demographic discourse depicts low fertility as “irrational” and thereby erases the real-life modifications that women and their partners, recognized or not, have made to altered material realities and shifting symbols related to class, gender, and even racial identities. Indeed, this genre of demographic knowledge production relies on a racial rationalization, which hides behind so-called objective concerns about social adjustments to shifting population structures. Current demographic science therefore breathes new life into the quiet revolution as it shifts the grounds for contesting the meaning and future of family making.

Broadening the Critical Focus

This article participates in a movement of scholars seeking to create a critical field of population studies. Susan Greenhalgh’s programmatic statement about constructing such a field advocates that we bring gender into the analysis, that we globalize our work by moving into national and transnational spaces, and that we broaden the critical focus by including analyses of population science itself (1995b:878). Demographic practices, like other habitual exercises of statecraft, have become so normalized as to be beyond the scope of questioning.⁵ By unveiling key epistemologies of demographic practice, I put into question population-science strategies. I am convinced that the project I undertake here is a necessary one if we are to understand the dire consequences of knowledge production that masquerades as neutral science and hence as “truth.” As Greenhalgh notes,

until we tackle the task of critically examining the discourses and practices of the hegemonic disciplines of population, anthropological knowledges about population will remain subjugated ones in the national and transnational spaces where power becomes policy and begins to spread. [Greenhalgh 1995b:878]

The potential transformations of demographic knowledge into policy are numerous, ranging from pronatalist politics that narrowly define women by their reproductive capabilities, such as the Italian fascist demographic campaign of the 1920s and 1930s, to xenophobic anti-immigrant structures and sentiments, now rampant in Europe.

Demographic science in Italy, whether concerning the movement of populations, births, or deaths, must be understood within the broader European Union (EU) socioeconomic and political context as it moves toward a unified market, a process some critics have noted entails constructing a Fortress Europe (Martiniello and Kazim 1991). Despite its “hot” and “superstar” economy, Italy has been stigmatized in terms of its political instability and corruption

as well as its lax immigration policies.⁶ An early 1990s report for the Commission of the European Communities identified Italy as the worst of the Southern European countries, which were targeted as weak spots in the erection of “fortress Europe” because of their “virtually unrestricted and uncontrollable increase of *irregular migration*” (Werth 1991:1, 23). More recently, Italy’s inclusion in the Monetary Union of Europe was doubtful. In 1996, EU finance ministers were skeptical of the Italian government’s ability to lower its budget deficit, and the implication was that Italy was scrambling to get its “financial house in order” (*New York Times* 1996, quoted in Schneider 1998:7–8). The political and economic requirements necessary for fitting into the European Union, in more complex ways than I am able to delineate here, make demographic behaviors and policies not merely a national concern but a European concern. On the alleged occasion of the birth of the six billionth human in October 1999,⁷ the authors of a national Italian research institute’s study on its citizens’ attitudes toward global population noted:

Demographic events are no longer “private” phenomena; on the contrary, they involve every inhabitant of the earth not only in terms of everyday life (marriages, births, deaths, migrations, etc.) but in terms of the influence that everyone’s behaviors has on global demographic dynamics and the future developments of our planet. [Palomba et al. 1999:1, my translation]

When did demographic events stop being “private”? The demographic campaigns of various nations of the 20th century suggest that nation-states and arts of statecraft have long ensured that life-cycle events were not private. They were, rather, “vital”—important business of the state. What has changed is the context in which population discourse now is taking place. I wish in this article to drive home the idea that what we believe to be individual reproductive choices are influenced in powerful ways by scientists who aggregate the outcomes of our intimate behaviors. Palomba (1991) suggests that she and other demographers are tuned into “global demographic dynamics,” yet the way in which demographers frame Italy’s low fertility as a grave “problem” suggests that demographers’ thinking is still more deeply connected to national agendas and policies than it is to global ones.

The “Problem” of Low Fertility and the Paradox of “Rational” Reproduction

Demographic data, as social historian Silvana Patriarca notes, have long occupied “a fundamental role in the symptomatology of the national ‘body’ ” (1998:79). In other words, the practice of generating statistics has provided a diagnostic tool for monitoring the social and economic well-being of the national body politic. This diagnostic role continues in the current demographic context. My analysis of authoritative and broadly cited texts written by well-known Italian demographers (see Table 1) reveals a systematic and consistent view of Italian women’s fertility as a “problem.”⁸

Demographers deploy a constellation of factors to create a view of low fertility as a problem. I argue their language indexes a type of modernity whose core logics have been turned upside down.⁹ These core logics are anchored in an assumption of a certain type of procreation as “rational” behavior. As Jane and Peter Schneider point out, “Europeans appear in a great deal of early and classical population theory as paragons of rationality, their minds disciplining their bodies on behalf of long-range goals” (1996:5). These long-range goals were thought to be rational responses to Malthusian predictions about disastrous overpopulation and resource depletion. Demographer Ansley Coale used the well-known phrase “calculus of conscious choice” to refer to how Europeans had become “rational” in their intimate and private lives (Schneider and Schneider 1996:5). The dualism of modernization theory as applied to reproductive behavior historically connected the use of birth control “to a rational turn of mind,” so that “traditional values” were opposed to “modern values.” The traditional-modern dichotomy parallels that between “natural” and “controlled” fertility (Schneider and Schneider 1996:5; see also Coale and Watkins 1986; Greenhalgh 1996). Prolific reproducers were stigmatized as backwards, and in demographic parlance pejoratively described as “laggards.”

The “*bassissima*,” or super-low, fertility of Italians and other Europeans throws that old dichotomous irrational/backward versus rational/modern model into crisis, particularly for those scientists who keep track of such trends. Demographers assume that modern European populations are rational. This assumption draws on the laws of a linear, modernization model of social evolution. When populations exhibit patterns that do not fall within certain expectations, the scientists who track those patterns tend to interpret the irregularities as deriving from self-destructive behaviors that predictably will lead to population decline and imbalance rather than lasting equilibrium.

Legend for Table 1

I identified ten key texts and then inventoried the authors’ stances, evaluating them in terms of the degree to which they view the fertility rate as a problem. The findings are outlined in Table 1. The symbols used indicate the following:

- neutral: the author’s position is not obvious
- √– subtly present: the low fertility is a problem, but scientific narrative avoids language that frames it as such
- √ present: the low fertility is a problem, and scientific narrative clearly frames it as such
- √+ strongly present: the low fertility is a problem, scientific narrative reveals that the problem is serious through use of metaphors or indexical language

I did not use symbols for positions that framed the low fertility as *not* being a problem or as being a positive trend; I had developed such symbols but having not found any works that fell into this category, I eliminated them to avoid confusion. The first five references listed below derive from books; the second five from reports.

Table 1. Degree to which specific demographic texts portray Italian fertility as a problem.

	Author, date, title	Textual evidence
1. √+	Golini (1991) Introduction to Palomba. <i>Crescita Zero</i> (Zero Growth)	<p>a) "In developed countries the problem is to know if and how one can stop the long and rapid decline of fertility" (Golini 1991:vii).</p> <p>b) In both cases of the European community and Italy, it is a "problem of knowledge for understanding much better . . . the mechanisms that are at the base of procreative behaviors that push demographic tendencies on absolutely heterodox trajectories, which have never been documented in human history and which are very far from near zero population growth that good sense suggests" (Golini 1991:vii).</p> <p>c) "To judge how low this figure of births is, it is enough to consider that, if it were to remain constant for a long while, the Italian population would descend from 57.5 to 43–44 million (Golini 1991:viii.).</p> <p>d) In the center-north one finds a "level of denatality never touched by another consistent population in the world" (Golini 1991:ix).</p> <p>e) "The median number of children per woman is between 0.9 and 1 in Emilia Romagna, in Friuli Venezia Giulia, in Liguria, when 2.05 children per woman would be necessary to insure a level of zero population growth. In other regions these indices are sensibly higher" (Golini 1991:ix).</p> <p>f) "In Italy few babies are born, so few in fact that only a few years ago an expert retained that such a level of denatality was 'impossible' " (Golini 1991:xii).</p> <p>g) "The new demographic behaviors in the nuptial and procreative field . . . brings to mind an Italian specificity demographically speaking not only for the negative records that we mark in the field of denatality or of aging of the population, but also for our own capacity to change without rupture, to adapt ourselves to the new conditions of social life without creating fractures with our history and our convictions" (Golini 1991:13).</p>

Table 1. Degree to which specific demographic texts portray Italian fertility as a problem.

2. √-	Palomba (1991) <i>Crescita Zero</i>	Palomba's language itself is neutral; however, Golini's introductory essay (see above) frames low fertility as a serious and alarming problem and hence gives one the sense that the analyses that follow are designed as "solutions." In this light, Chapter 6, entitled "Italians and Demographic Policies," is a carefully constructed analysis of respondents' replies to questions about their views of state interventions designed to increase fertility (Palomba 1991).
3. √+	Golini (1994) <i>Tendenze demografiche e politiche per la popolazione</i> (Demographic tendencies and policies for the population)	"The Italian demographic tendencies are provoking in the population—quickly, but <i>silently</i> —a true and real 'mutation,' that has in itself the potential to unhinge the whole social and economic structure of the country" (Golini 1994:8).
4. √+	Livi-Bacci (1994) Introduction to Golini. <i>Tendenze demografiche e politiche per la popolazione</i>	"The topic of low fertility is perhaps the one that triggers the most emotional reactions. Whoever works on this topic is located in the worrisome position of the doctor faced with the case of an adolescent who refuses food. Are we dealing with a prolonged loss of appetite destined to disappear naturally or are we facing a case of anorexia? Are we talking about physiology or pathology?" (Livi-Bacci 1994:14).
5. √+	Volpi (1996) <i>Figli d' Italia</i> (Children of Italy)	<p>"Introduction: Gian Burrasca and the problem of children" (Volpi 1996:5).</p> <p>"But the contradiction between words and facts could also reveal, how shall we say it? the guilty conscience (in the sense that the fewer children you have, the more you claim you desire them; the more the fertility rate of women declines, the more it creates a desire for them to be mothers) of a people—in this case, the Italians—for whom birth rate has undoubtedly sunk to the lowest level in the world" (Volpi 1996:31).</p> <p>"A grand problem remains to be examined. . . . that of the so-called age-stratified structure of the population. Let's begin, to explain ourselves, with the trend of genuine movement— or of the difference between births and deaths" (Volpi 1996:83).</p>

Table 1. Degree to which specific demographic texts portray Italian fertility as a problem.

6. √-	ISTAT (1996) <i>Famiglia, abitazioni, servizi di pubblica utilità</i> (Family, housing, public transportation and services)	"The decline in fertility that has characterized the Nation in the last few years has led to, on the one hand, a decrease of couples with children and an increase of those without children; and on the other hand, a lessening of the number of couples with three or more children and a contemporaneous increase in the weight of couples with an only child" (ISTAT 1996:23).
7. √	ISTAT (1995) <i>Annuario statistico italiano 1994</i> (Annual Italian Statistics)	"In 1993, for the first time in the demographic history of post-unification Italy, except obviously for the war years of 1917 and 1918, the genuine balance (live births less deaths) had a negative result of more than 5,000 units, due to arriving at a new historical low in terms of births, equal to 538,000 (well 226,000 less than the preceding year) corresponding to a natality quotient of 9.3 per thousand inhabitants" (1995:55, cited in Volpi 1996:30).
8. √	Palomba, Menniti, Mussino, and Moors (1987) <i>Attitudes Towards Demographic Trends and Population Policy</i>	"In the last 20 to 30 years the Italian socio-demographic situation has changed in many respects. The fertility decline is undoubtedly one of the most important changes, with respect to both its demographic-economic consequences such as an aging population and the concomitant adjustments in the field of health care and social services, and to its sociocultural effects, such as changing attitudes toward marriage and children" (Palomba et al. 1987:3).
9. √	Golini, De Simoni, and Citoni (1995) <i>Tre scenari per il possibile sviluppo della popolazione delle regioni italiane al 2044</i> (Three scenarios for possible population development in Italian regions in 2044)	"None of the Italian scholars that work on population would have thought to imagine some thirty years ago that in the '90s the average number of children per woman in our Nation would have arrived at the level of around 1.2—the lowest in the world and likely the lowest ever documented in the history of humanity for a large-scale population (Golini et al. 1995:1).
10. √+	Lori, Golini, and Cantalini (1995) <i>Atlante dell'invecchiamento della popolazione</i> (Atlantas of the aging of the population)	"In the last decades all the attention and the effort of public opinion and political groups have turned toward the substantial economic and social transformations of the Nation, to the important political events—and to the fierce struggles that have accompanied them. We have been dealing with rapid and profound transformations that have radically modified, and in some cases unhinged, the entire structure of the whole society" (Lori et al. 1995:1).

The record-low fertility rates have resulted in a bit of a crisis for demographers over the meaning of rationality: The measuring stick that demographers long used to mark “rational” reproductive behavior no longer has units that work for them. In the old scenario, it was enough to divide reproductive behavior into two halves: those who practiced “uncontrolled” or “natural” fertility were labeled as “laggards” and viewed as backward and irrational; those who practiced “controlled” fertility were “leaders” and viewed as modern and rational.¹⁰ So people who had small families (say, two or three children) were rational, and those who had large families (four, five, or more) were not there yet. Contemporary Italians control their fertility, and hence would be rational according to the old demographic transition theory rules.¹¹ But with the new zero population rules, their “*bassissima*,” or super-low, fertility becomes a sign once again of “irrationality.” So in a sense there has emerged a quite narrow range of reproductive behavior that is considered “rational” if the discourses on the current fertility trends can stand as a guide.

Drawing on texts by well-known Italian demographers, I have identified and named three strategies that demographers commonly use to portray the low birthrate as so low as to be irrational. The most direct strategy, “Beyond Good Sense,” is characterized by demographers’ use of language that makes the reproductive practices underlying the trend appear irrational, self-destructive, and even immoral. A second strategy, the “Dangerous Heterodoxy” tactic, occurs when demographers use language that paints a picture of the trend as diverging from accepted doctrines or opinions. A third strategy, “Never-Before-Documented,” occurs when the birthrate is described as so low as to be beyond imagination. The following examples draw from Table 1.

Beyond Good Sense. Note that Golini (Excerpt 1.b) describes the current rate of reproduction as contrary to “a level which good sense suggests.” He identifies Italian regions with very low birthrates and then describes as “sensibly higher” other regions where birthrates are well above those (Golini 1991:vii).

Dangerous Heterodoxy. The second strategy occurs where Golini describes demographic trends as being on “absolutely heterodox trajectories” (Excerpt 1.b). The accepted and desirable trajectory, by contrast, is zero population growth. Golini’s description of Italian demographic tendencies as “provoking in the population . . . a true and real ‘mutation’ ” (Excerpt 3) also reveals his view that the behavior is unorthodox. Furthermore, the metaphoric power of the word *mutation* conjures up images of cancer and other illnesses that threaten the well-being of an individual or a population. In another passage, Lori et al. (1995) describe the reproductive practices as having “radically modified, and in some cases unhinged, the entire structure of the whole society” (Excerpt 10). Again, the word choice of *unhinged* is anything but neutral; rather, it suggests something dangerous, something on the verge of collapsing.

Never-Before Documented. The third tactic is the most subtle yet pervasive strategy for depicting the low birthrate as a problem. We read of a “level of denatality never touched by another stable population” (Excerpt 1.d), of an expert who “maintained that such a level of denatality was ‘impossible’” (Excerpt

1.f), of “negative records” (Excerpt 1.g), of a birthrate that has “sunk to the lowest level in the world” (Excerpt 6), of a “first time” phenomenon occurring only in times of war (Excerpt 7), and of a phenomenon beyond prediction (Excerpt 9):

None of the Italian scholars that work on population would have thought to imagine some thirty years ago that in the ‘90s the average number of children per woman in our Nation would have arrived at the level of around 1.2—the lowest in the world and likely the lowest ever documented in the history of humanity for a large-scale population. [Golini et al. 1995:1]

Rather than condemning Italian scholars for their inability to foresee the current population trend, this statement suggests that the national trend is so dramatic that it has taken even the most rational minds—those of scholars—by surprise.

“Loss of Appetite or Anorexia?”: A Demographer’s Etiology of Very Low Fertility

The most blatant instance of current demographic discourse serving as a national sort of symptomatology—a reading of the signs of the national body’s general health—can be found in Livi-Bacci’s introduction (1994) to the important *Tendenze demografiche e politiche per la popolazione* (Demographic Tendencies and Policies for the Population), the third report on the Italian demographic situation, funded by the national population research institute (IRP). He describes demographers who work on the topic as being “in the worrisome position of the doctor faced with the case of an adolescent who refuses food” (Livi-Bacci 1994:14). This analogy epitomizes the “Beyond Good Sense” strategy. It frames reproductive activities of Italians as far from rational, for anorexia is considered neither reasonable nor sensible but rather a debilitating, self-destructive disorder, not unlike hysteria and insanity. It is also very much a gendered disorder.

In offering possible etiologies for this apparent deep-seated and self-destructive societal malady, Livi-Bacci offers two possibilities: the first he calls physiological (we might describe these factors as sociological), questioning whether the very low fertility is

the consequence of the tiresome adjustment to a revolution that has brought millions of women into the workforce. of economic difficulty for the nuclear family faced with new and more demanding models of consumption. of education investments that are too long and expensive. of a complex lifestyle that weighs heavily due to inefficient social organization. [Livi-Bacci 1994:14]

If the cause for the loss of appetite, or very low fertility, is rooted in these types of factors, he argues, then “there is hope that social-political interventions can favor a demographic re-equilibrium with an upsurge in fertility. The list of possible interventions includes pronatalist measures” (Livi-Bacci 1994:14). In the second case there is “no hope” to reverse these “negative” trends, since they are the result of pathology: “It could also be that we are facing a hard ‘refusal’ of procreation that is rooted in a level of value choices beyond the influence of

context and hence a true and real anorexia" (Livi-Bacci 1994:14, my translation).

This begs for pause. Who is engaging in a "hard refusal" to procreate if not women?¹² Without naming women, the language nevertheless most strongly indexes and implicates women, who ultimately are the sex/gender whose reproductive behaviors figure most centrally into demographers' calculations. (Men do not matter when it comes to calculations of fertility rates, since the biological parameters of getting pregnant, of gestating, of child-bearing, and of maternity are of such a different order of certainty than the biological parameters of inseminating and of paternity.¹³) Furthermore, we can infer the "hard refusers" are women since anorexia is a disorder typically associated with women and with infertile women at that. The implication, then, is that women, angst ridden and body obsessed, are rejecting the responsibility to refurbish the nation. At best, Italian women's family-making practices appear in demographers' accounts as a social ill to be fixed; at worse their behaviors appear as an irrational, even amoral, pathology beyond cure.

The way in which demographers have scientifically defined the current low birthrate as a problem serves as a moral guidepost for blaming women and has doubtlessly influenced Italian as well as global media representations of the trend. A *New York Times* article entitled "Population Implosion Worries a Graying Europe" frames low fertility as an "epidemic," one whose etiology can be located in women's "choosing work and education over having children" (Specter 1998). The article describes birthrates in many countries as being "in a rapid, sustained decline. Never before—except in times of plague, war and deep economic depression—have birthrates fallen so low, for so long." This popular press article participates in the "never-before documented" strategy that I identified above as a tactic demographers use to make reproductive patterns seem unthinkable, irrational, and dangerous. Plague, war, deep economic depression; these three phenomena are clearly disasters, and we can deduce that the article's central message is that, ultimately, women's "choice" to be productive rather than primarily reproductive is equivalent to a disaster on the order of plague, war, or deep economic depression. Easily overlooked are the important economic contributions that women have historically made to their families and regional economies. To reduce fertility decline to an epidemic-like scenario in which women are portrayed as the major carriers is to deny the social and economic upheavals that dramatically transformed people's lives and their locations within kin, tribute, and capitalist modes of production.¹⁴

Furthermore, this portrayal of the "population problem" as a disaster complicates Palomba's suggestion that there is a global demographic dynamic at work. If global overpopulation were really the only issue—the birth of that 6 billionth human—then low fertility rates like those of Italian women would be cause for celebration. The demographers, however, are not celebrating. Nor are the journalists who report on these trends. The global dynamics at play involve issues of political economy, for example, issues that get at the heart of economically wealthy and economically poor countries and those policymakers

who decide when and whether immigrant workers should legitimately move between the cores and peripheries.

A Jarring Misfit

Demographers and the media portray the low birthrate as a problem, but what does looking at the lived experiences of family-making reveal about the quiet revolution? In what unexpected ways does family-making create problems for those who live it? To speak of fertility decline primarily as a problem veils other struggles that have been playing out as demographic transitions have occurred. My ethnographic research in two textile and agricultural production communes in the Province of Prato during the latter 1990s leads me to conclude that there is a jarring misfit between the stories demographers are telling and the lives Italians have lived and are living.

In particular, struggles related to gendered aspects of identity have materialized as the patriarchal family hierarchy has toppled; struggles concerning class-based aspects of identity have emerged as new processes of class formation have taken hold; and struggles related to racial processes have come into a new light as migration patterns and policies have shifted. All of these struggles articulate in the context of global dynamics. They also recall the specter of history. For example, that many central Italians come from humble peasant or working-class backgrounds is particularly meaningful given that the economy of Prato has presented numerous people with the possibility of literally going from rags to riches. After all, the thriving industrial district of Prato built on the city's 20th-century distinction as Italy's center of rag commerce: Old clothes and fabrics from all over the world were and still are regenerated into raw textile materials there. As the postwar economy boomed, many people had the chance to make money and, with it, acquire a new-moneyed identity. New strategies of family-making were a crucial aspect of this new consumer type of subjectivity.

The remainder of this article draws on ethnographic fieldwork to examine how the current demographic situation plays out in terms of ideologies of gender, class, and ethnicity/race. It also considers how the prolific demographic concern about the low birthrate has shaped and continues to shape individual subjectivities and practices in powerful yet unexpected ways.¹⁵

The Three Pigs: A Local Theory

There are many "reasons" circulating in Italian society about why the birthrate is so low. One of my favorite local explanations comes from Carolina Morelli, a mother of three in her mid-fifties who was influential in local as well as regional politics. She and her husband managed the family sweater-finishing firm where I worked for about six months in 1996. One day while I was at her house, operating a machine to sew buttons on sweaters in the room designated for sweater work, she offered me her theory of why women used to have lots of babies and why they no longer do. Women, she said, were in the middle

of three *maiali* (pigs): the priest, the *padrone* (landlord), and the husband. The priest wanted couples to have sex only for reproduction, to increase bodies for his parish and souls for heaven; the *padrone* wanted lots of children because more arms meant a bigger harvest and a bigger share for him and his estate; and the husband wanted more people to order around. Now, nobody listens to the priest, the *padrone* no longer has peasants or title, and the husband views children as drains on his time and pocketbook.

Carolina's theory speaks to a perceived erosion of patriarchy. She views the trend toward small families as a positive one. The new generation so many Italians lament as egotistical for Carolina means independent-minded citizens who will not be so likely to fall for political movements like fascism. And her daughter will be able to work as an engineer. "*Figli programmati sono figli fortunati*" [Planned children are lucky children], she likes to say.¹⁶

Carolina's parable suggests that demographers' stories deny an important aspect of the quiet revolution: that it is a revolution, though often silently so, against patriarchy and the patriarchal structures of power that hierarchically ordered social relations for centuries. The shift in reproductive practices was in part rooted in a festering peasant protest among women and junior males against "the rigidity of the pecking-order in the family" (Becattini 1998:83), as well as powers of decision making and the availability of income "inconsistent with the distribution of workload, capacity, and responsibility" (Becattini 1986:908, my translation). In the area of central Italy where I worked, for example, women straw weavers comprised the leading force behind an industrializing countryside since they offered a cheap source of labor: the most extensive central Italian labor strikes of the 19th century involved these nonurban weavers working out of homes in the towns and hamlets lining the banks of the Arno River.¹⁷ Nearly every household in a 1901 census contained at least one woman whose professional occupation was noted as *trecciaiola* (straw weaver).¹⁸

The One-Child Story of a Straw Weaver

Emilia, a straw weaver born in 1920 who worked from the time she was five years old, offered memories that revealed her connections to a global economy: she spoke of childhood speed-weaving games that tempted the winner with postcards sent from overseas emigrant relatives; she recalled for me the dramatic tale of a communist uncle who escaped Mussolini's regime by stowing away among straw-hat cargo destined for South America, where he became an importer of hats, many of which Emilia and her fellow women townsfolk produced. Deeply embedded in these memories were her postwar explanations about how she came to marry "late," at age 30 (in 1950), and how she came to have only one child. Her story offers insight into understanding a generation of women whose profound changes led them to put their own welfare before that of the patriarchal family. Emilia's strategy not to continue the peasant tradition of large families but to stop with her daughter was supported by her husband, who soon left the land for the factory. This shift in family making represents a cultural adjustment to tremendous social and economic

changes, ones involving modernity and new definitions of and possibilities for womanhood. These themes can be found in the following excerpt from a discussion I had with Emilia. In transcribing and analyzing this talk, I have drawn on linguistic anthropological methods (see, in particular, Ochs et al. 1996). I have retained the words in their original form because speakers of Italian will be able to hear the rural Tuscan dialect, one marked by cadences associated with a less-educated generation. I include my own talk in the transcription even though in the following passage it does not contribute to the content *per se*; however, the back-channel cues do reveal the research process in the final product.¹⁹

A key element of Emilia's narrative is the doctor's misdiagnosis of abdominal pain she was suffering as a young woman. At the time of the telling, her only child, Patricia, was three years old. Her discussion of the misdiagnosis—the doctor's mistaking the pain caused by a specific cyst for pain caused by general stress—offers insight into the cultural transformations in postwar central Italy. It reveals how hegemonic processes play out in the context of interpersonal relations between a rural peasant woman and an urban physician. In this case, the leading view of the urban, educated elite—embodied in the role of the doctor—was one that normalized the nuclear family as well as associated morality and health with this type of family making. By contrast, the hegemonic view pathologized the extended patriarchal family. The moment of pathos becomes apparent in the narrative when Emilia recalls the doctor's etiology of her illness. He suggested that her moving from a nuclear household to an extended family was the cause of her anxiety and cramps. He was thereby suggesting a psychological cause to her physical pain. Etiology here becomes ideology; the doctor, through his misrecognition of the cause of Emilia's pain, was expressing a leading idea related to family making. In particular, the story reveals how doctor-patient interactions can be opportunities for doctors to express hegemonic views of normal behavior, and, in turn, for patients to react to those views.

It is worth clarifying that Emilia's statement that the operation did not do her harm (Line 5) is a reference to a fear, at the time, that the intervention had left her infertile. In the hospital, she apparently had some rather catty roommates who insisted she had had a hysterectomy. Even though this was far from the truth, at the time she reassured herself that if the doctor had taken out everything it did not matter since she already had one child. She actually says "another child" (Line 5) but this is not a reference to a second child. It may be a colloquialism or an instance in which she imagines those never realized babies in the light of the doctor's gregarious comment (not reproduced here) that she "could have ten more children," a metaphorical way of saying her reproductive health was sound. Her story follows:

- | | | | |
|----|----------------|---|---|
| 1. | Emilia: | La Patrizia l'aveva due
anni e qualcosina. | Patricia, she was a little over two
years old. |
| 2. | | Sicchè ebbi questa
operazione. | And then I had this operation. |
| 3. | Betsy: | Ahh. | Ohh. |
| 4. | Emilia: | Però non mi dava noi(a)— | But it didn't really bother me— |

- | | | |
|-------------|---|--|
| 5. | mi non noceva aveva
un'altro bambino, | it didn't do me any harm since I
had another child, |
| 6. | mi disse il professore | the doctor said to me |
| 7. | perchè non mi levarono
niente a me | because he didn't remove
anything from me |
| 8. | soltanto questa ciste all'
ovarie. | except for this ovarian cyst. |
| 9. Betsy: | Ah. | Oh. |
| 10. Emilia: | Eh! Sicchè mi disse il
professore | See! So the doctor said to me, |
| 11. | "Perchè?" | "Why?" |
| 12. | quando gli chiesi io icchè
gli aveva fatto. | when I asked him what he had
done. |
| 13. | Infatti penso l'aveva— | In fact I thought he had— |
| 14. | La Patrizia due anni, | Patricia was two |
| 15. | tr- tre! | th-three! |
| 16. | quasi tre anni l'aveva. | almost three years old. |
| 17. | Però io gl'era un
pezzettino che mi sentio
male | But it had been a while since I'd
been feeling bad |
| 18. | e mi si pigliava queste
coliche. | and I was having these stomach
pains. |
| 19. | E non me l'aveva cono— | And he hadn't kno— |
| 20. | non me l'avevano
conosciuta. | and they hadn't recognized it. |
| 21. Betsy: | Ah. | Oh. |
| 22. Emilia: | Il dottore mi dicea | The doctor was like |
| 23. | "Gli è un pò nervoso." | "You're a little nervous." |
| 24. | Ero abituata io | I was used to [living] |
| 25. | con la mi mamma | with my mother |
| 26. | ei mi fratello e sola | and my brother only |
| 27. | non- ripre— | I didn't— |
| 28. | a ritrovarmi con la casa in
dieci persone | to find myself in a household with
ten people |
| 29. | mi pareva un po' di
sopraccapo | it seemed like I was going to lose it |
| 30. | e lo dicea a me | and he was like |
| 31. | "era preso un pò di
esaurimento nervoso." | "you're having a little nervous
breakdown." |
| 32. Betsy: | Ah | Oh. |
| 33. Emilia: | Invece un'era vero. | But it wasn't true. |
| 34. | Gli era il male avevo. | It was the illness I had. |

It seems to me that Emilia recognizes the ideology at work beneath the surface of the doctor's misdiagnosis—though she would not use that terminology. Nevertheless, she appears to be telling me, in her peasant-worker approach to social analysis, that this encounter was a normalization experience for her.²⁰ Urban Florentine elites in the postwar-era attached a stigma to large, extended rural families, and hence the doctor was in an opaque way chastising her for violating the established norm with regard to family making. The doctor, by locating the ultimate causal agent for her symptoms in the extended patriarchal family, was engaging in a modernist critique of this household structure;

such a living arrangement is viewed here as a threat to one's sanity, to one's ability to exercise sound reason. In essence, the patriarchal extended family becomes the antithesis to modernity because being modern means being in control; once someone has "lost one's head" (*sopraccapo*, Line 29) one has lost control. This punch line, of sorts, directly relates to the larger point of Emilia's story: the misdiagnosis and its meaning.

The most significant "evaluation" clause occurs when Emilia interrupts the story's temporality to comment on the "so what" of the narrative (Labov 1972:366) at Line 20—"and they hadn't recognized it." The evaluation confirms that the point of the telling was indeed the misdiagnosis. Furthermore, the sudden self-interruption (Line 19) signals the sideward glance: Bakhtin argues (1984:205) such moments occur when a speaker anticipates the response of the listener, and hence they often indicate ideological conflict. Note that between Lines 19 and 20 Emilia shifts in number from third-person singular to third-person plural, suggesting that not just one doctor but a worldview of men in white coats informs her memory of the misdiagnosis. The encounter between her and the medical establishment is a relation of power saturated with normalizing forces.

Later, when I asked Emilia to clarify why she did not have another child, her health problem emerged as only part of the story; in fact, she emphasized her good reproductive health and her generative capacity, citing the doctor's joking comment about having another "ten" children. Rather, the other part of her one-child story concerned important changes occurring in the social fabric of labor and its effect on kin modes of production. The sharecropping crisis resulted in major social dislocations particularly for the patriarchal family (Contini and Ravenni 1987). At one time daughters-in-law derived power from having numerous children, but this too was changing. As Emilia told me, her sister-in-law did not have any children and, nevertheless, her in-laws liked this other woman best of all. Emilia sensed little or no pressure to have more children. Her husband went along with his wife because the new family structure and the changing economy required and allowed it. Central to the experience of the quiet revolution was a shifting ideological process involving the breakdown of the patriarchal family and a related rise in individualism intertwined with a newly defined global market and reconfigured identities rooted in emergent class structures.

Postwar Class Formation and Risks of Stigma

In recent years, family-making practices of central Italians have been powerfully linked to social expectations about what has been seen as "necessary" for raising children and for seeking middle-class respectability (Schneider and Schneider 1996:273). An ideology of class and status combines with an ideology of gender to shape women's and men's decisions about the number of children to bring into their family. Social identities, as Henrietta Moore reminds, are constituted through "ideologies or 'naturalized' cultural conventions . . . implicated in power structures and in the structuring of inequalities" (1994:

92). Allow me to offer two brief examples of identity formation related to emergent class structures.

The neighborhood where I lived during the first year of my fieldwork (October 1995–96) in a textile-production area of the Province of Prato was settled largely after World War II by former Tuscan peasants and Calabrian as well as Sicilian immigrants who had numerous siblings but few children themselves. This newly moneyed province is legendary for its variety of postwar consumer culture: former peasants and rag-wholesalers who came into money through the textile boom are known to have bought books by the kilo. As purchases of symbolic capital, these books would never be read. A fashion- and design-conscious sort of place, people joke that you live for your house rather than having a house to live in. Language teachers use words like *mania* (craziness), *fissazione* (fixation), and *ossessione* (obsession) to describe how people, especially women, have a habit of always thinking about their house. It is also a place where certain material goods are said to distance those who possess them from *genterella* (low-class folk). Despite the strong tradition of leftist politics in central Italy, having few children is also important to the cultural play of transcending stigmas associated with poverty. That people speak openly about the relationship between family size, economic prosperity and image management serves as evidence that notions of modernity in demographic and development discourse are in wide, popular circulation.²¹

Carlotta was 38 when I met her, the mother of one child and part owner of a family sweater firm. Her husband, brother-in-law, and mother-in-law provided the key labor inside the firm; various stages of production were subcontracted to other small firms. The family lived in a graciously restored farmhouse; Carlotta, her husband, and daughter occupied one floor, and the widowed mother-in-law and her eldest, bachelor son the other. The *maglificio* (sweater firm) was located in one wing of the home. One day Carlotta and her mother-in-law spoke to me about their lives. Carlotta explained the pressure she felt to have everything—clothes, food, and house—in perfect order, and the ambivalence she and her husband felt concerning the possibility of having another child. A theme of social status and public displays of it emerged as I wrote up in my fieldnotes the conversation between Carlotta, her mother-in-law, and myself. This excerpt from my field notes begins with Carlotta speaking:

“Everything has to be a name brand. Last year Alice (then gearing up to enter third grade) had a backpack that cost Lit30,000 (US\$18.00). All the kids looked at her, so this year I spent Lit130,000 (US\$78.00) and got her a Sailor Moon backpack, the type used in middle school. Otherwise you’re looked upon as *genterella*.”²² a low-class or disrespectable person.

“Ah,” her mother-in-law chimed in, “they’re all really *genterella*.”

“Of course they are,” said Carlotta. “But everybody wants to cover it up, to show the next person up.” [Field notes, 28 June 1997]

This passage suggests that Carlotta seeks to avoid a sense of social inferiority for herself as well as her daughter. Social status powerfully shapes Carlotta’s sense of personal identity and self worth. With such an emphasis on the

acquisition of expensive material goods, coupled with what I have elsewhere called a culture of responsibility in which a great deal of attention is placed on the details of laundering, ironing, clothing, feeding, healing, and educating, the thought of numerous children often seems beyond reach. It is worth noting that demographers' official surveys cite Italian women as those with the largest gap between children desired (an average of two) and those actually had (an average of one).

The stigma for having numerous (more than two) children is not merely imagined but lived, as revealed in the experience of another woman, who was pregnant with her third son at the time I interviewed her. Cinzia, then 36, had worked in a sweater factory until she had her first son. Afterward, she did part-time piecework or housecleaning. She experienced serious stigma with her third pregnancy. Friends, relatives and town acquaintances used words like "half-witted" and "idiot" as well as pitying phrases such as "Oh, that poor woman!" when they heard she was having a third *figliolo* (son).

Cinzia's talk about the stigma she endured was marked by frequent moments of hesitation, incoherence, and laughter—dysfluencies that emerged through fine-grained discourse analysis in a narrative describing others' reactions to her pregnancy. These dysfluent moments indicate the presence of a heteroglossic speech community in which "language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other" (Bakhtin 1981:293; see also Hill 1995). Reporting the harsh speech of her friends and relatives appears painful for Cinzia, as evidenced by the frequent presence of pauses (indicated below by "..."), elongated vowels (indicated by "="), unfinished thoughts (indicated by "—"), and nervous laughter (indicated by "@"):

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| 1. | Cinzia: "Come farò con tre maschi?" | "How will I manage with three boys?" |
| 2. | Dice: [. . .] "T- t'aurai da fa tanto," | They go: [. . .] "Y- you'll have so much to do," |
| 3. | ma io passato i primi mesi | well I spent the first months |
| 4. | ero un pò = o demoralizzata perchè dice, | I was a little = demoralized because they were like, |
| 5. | "T'aurai da fa tanto con tre maschi. | "You'll have so much to do with three boys." |
| 6. | Insomma perchè i maschi, l'omo qui praticamente— | Let's just say because boys, the man here practically— |
| 7. | c'è sempre quello che i fare in casa della donna— | there's this idea that the stuff the woman does in the house— |
| 8. | e l'omo gli ha altro che da buttare all'aria @ | and the man has other stuff to do than fling air around @ |

Her explanation for why her friends might have been so concerned about the sex of the child reveals ideological conflict that we might recognize, after Gramsci, as contradictory consciousness (1971:333). Cinzia's self-reflective tendency allows her to see the unfairness embedded in a sex/gender system that elevates males to a status which prohibits them from doing housework, for housework is nothing more than "flinging air around," (Line 8). Yet her uncomfortable

laughter would suggest that she is unable to rise above old habits and transform social reality and, in particular, gender relations. It is almost as though her laughter signals the multiple viewpoints she, by necessity, must hold in order to perpetuate the life she is living as a woman, wife, and expectant mother. In other passages, it became clear that the dominant ideology about controlled, “rational,” small family making exercised its power directly on Cinzia’s sense of social identity. Her personhood was thrown into crisis—“if I were a strong woman I wouldn’t take it so hard,” she told me. At times, she questioned whether she was indeed “half-witted”—a heavy burden to bear in a cultural context that places such a high premium on reason and on the appearance of rational reproductive behavior.

Another Source of Postwar Stigma: Race

Stigma has its roots not only in class- and gender-based cultural struggles for respectability as key symbols of bourgeois rationality (Schneider and Schneider 1996), but also in shifting meanings of “race.” People who became my friends told me painful stories about the racism they encountered when they first moved north from Calabria to Tuscany, in the 1960s, when the textile industry of Prato was booming, and the economy beckoned people to leave the countryside and the South to work in factories or artisan workshops. Elsewhere (Krause 1998), I have explored the much debated issue of whether one can call internal discrimination by Northern Italians against Southern Italians “racism” as opposed to “regional chauvinism.” In both cases, somatic and cultural characteristics are fused and result in a type of “othering” that elevates the status and power of the “in” group. There has long been a biological basis to the type of discrimination practiced in Italy. Italian positivist scholars of criminology writing between 1880–1920 identified “race” as causal to the crime in Southern Italy (Gibson 1998), a glaring instance of biologism for which Gramsci took the positivists to task. Persistent economic differences between the North and the South, often referred to as the Southern Question, were framed as resulting from racial inferiority (Gibson 1998:100; Gramsci 1971:70–71). For northerners who did not accept that Italian unification resulted from a hegemonic process in which the North acted like an “octopus” enriching itself at the expense of the South, Gramsci scolded, “There only remained one explanation: the organic incapacity of the inhabitants, their barbarity, their biological inferiority” (1971:71).

One essential aspect of my fieldwork was my participation in community life as a parent of a first-grader in a local elementary school. The parents, mostly mothers of one or two children, congregated each afternoon in a courtyard outside the locked school until the bell rang, at which point the *bidella* (custodian) unlocked the doors. It was like floodgates had just been opened: black *grebbiuli* (school smocks) with white collars and red bows blurred past as children burst into the schoolyard.

I always made an effort to arrive at least ten minutes before the bell rang to take part in the schoolyard talk. One day in March 1997, several mothers

began speaking about the recent arrival of Albanians. "Tuscans are carrying the Albanians on their backs," said one mother. She used the word *carico*, which means "load." She then switched her target to Southern Italians. "Things are so bad in parts of Calabria, the women still have to go and bring in water from outside," implying that the lack of infrastructure signified a backward place with backward people who prevent things from functioning. "These people don't really want to work. They're free-loaders, parasites."

A Sicilian friend of mine standing nearby took offense. She read into this woman's remarks a general anti-immigrant sentiment and began to defend herself and her husband, stressing how hard they both work since moving to Tuscany four years ago. "I'm allergic to dust and yet I still go and clean. I couldn't find any other work here, but I go every morning and clean other people's houses." As a southern Italian who had experienced racism, she was quick to note it.

A few days later, at the bar where I regularly had breakfast with a group of five mothers, the conversation turned to a comparison of new immigrants and gypsies. "At least the Albanians, the Chinese, the Africans, they work. What do the gypsies do? All they do is rob. They freeload." To support her accusation, the woman drew on an experience from her extended family: she told us about a "gypsy kid" who attended her brother's child's school and complained that the gypsy parents did not pay taxes. She then implicated the gypsy population by invoking immoral reproductive practices. "All they do is bring children into the world and then they abandon them—throw them into the streets to beg and rob. . . . All the gypsy women should be sterilized."

Demographic discourse was central to these daily moments of Othering. Anti-immigrant talk easily segued into anti-Southern Italian discourse and readily encompassed gypsies and perceptions of "reckless" parenting.²³ The migrations of southern peoples frequently blended into one another in the way they arose in social conversation, political rhetoric, and media reports. Discourse about populations also included strategic and often racialized evaluations of reproductive practices. These conversations led me to inquire into the racist associations that exist at an everyday discursive level.

The low Italian birthrate is frequently juxtaposed in popular media reports against the growing non-European immigrant population and easily becomes linked to fears about the demise of an Italian "race" and the disappearance of European culture.²⁴ What is the source of this alarm? Are only the media alarmist or can this sense of alarm also be detected in the reports and discourses of demographic science? My research suggests that the media and demographic science hold tremendous sway in shaping popular perceptions and sounding population-related alarms.²⁵

Demographic Discourses, Low Fertility, and "Elite" Racism

The alarmist discourses of demographers, if not blatantly racist, enable racist ideological projects and hence help maintain hegemonic views toward immigrant "others." If we take ideologies to be "unified schemes or configurations

developed to underwrite or manifest power” (Wolf 1999:4), then racist ideologies are those which rely on a type of power based on hierarchical fictions of race. In my view, race is a social construction; its consequences are no less real than if race were based purely on biological difference since the category is vacuous such that those in power can fill it with whatever is convenient (Goldberg 1993). Race “has been used as a legitimating ideological tool to suppress and exploit specific social groups and to deny them access to material and cultural resources, work, welfare services, housing, political rights, etc.” remind Wodak and Reisigl (1999:176).²⁶ Relevant to my story about how a supposedly objective scientific endeavor enables racism is Teun van Dijk’s observation that elite public discourse plays a primary role in reproducing racism. He argues that elites—the media, in particular, but also politicians, corporations, and academics—are key to reproducing racially-based social hierarchies (van Dijk 1993:31, 242–243, 257). The media clearly exercise substantial influence throughout Europe in shaping social outlooks and memories as well as in reproducing racist ideologies. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that reporters, editors, and producers rely on “expert” sources for the information they disseminate.

Italian demographers’ projections of subzero population growth, as frequently reported in the Italian media, contribute to fears and anxieties toward immigrants, who are seen as fulfilling alarmist demographic prophecies with regard to a future shortage of Italians in the labor force and the demise of an Italian “race.” This emotion of fear was expressed by a former Labor Minister who called on Italians to produce more babies “to keep away armadas of immigrants from the southern shores of the Mediterranean” (Martiniello and Kazim 1991:88).²⁷ One does not have to look long or hard to detect negative associations between immigrants and the birthrates of Italians. Consider this headline, published in 1996, in a national daily:

Culle più vuote, l’Italia cresce
solo per l’apporto degli immigrati

More cradles empty. Italy grows only due
to immigrant supply

[*La Nazione* 1996:7]²⁸

The article set up a false cause-and-effect relationship, implying immigrants represent the only reason for population growth. The population, however, is also aging. Life expectancy has risen to 74 years for men and 80 for women. Worth noting is that the total foreign presence at that time equaled just over 2 percent of the Italian population. Official estimates from December 31, 1998 put the number of immigrants at 1,033,235 individuals holding a *permesso di soggiorno* (legal residency permit) plus about 250,000 “underground” people as compared to 57.8 million Italian citizens. As of January 1, 2000, the foreign resident population totaled 1,270,553, a 13.8 percent increase from the previous year (ISTAT 2000; Palanca 1999:15).

Alarmist language is one enabling device that helps perpetuate racist sentiments and practices. Such tones also characterize representations of the demographic relationship between the country’s low birthrate and its aging population. An article in July 1997 entitled “Italy? It Is Old and without Children,”

noted that in some regions of the center-north, the level of natality was below one child per couple (*La Stampa* 1997:17).²⁹ The report described Italy as having become “the oldest country in the world, a country of great-grandparents.” Minister of Health Rosy Bindi said, “If the increase in the life span is a conquest, the low level of natality is a sign of lost civility or at least of tragic uneasiness” (quoted in *La Stampa* 1997:17).

The article did not explain why Bindi interpreted the low birthrate as an indicator of *inciviltà* (barbarity), an ordeal of civility.³⁰ We can take a clue as to Bindi’s spin on the matter from a national conference that received substantial media coverage. The motivation for looking to this report as a route of grasping the sense of tragedy evident in Bindi’s perspective is that, as a public health official, her viewpoint is likely shaped by the expert number crunchers of the state, in other words, the demographers. And much of popular opinion about the demographic situation comes from the media’s reportage on demographers’ findings. The conference, “Population and Environment in Developed Countries,” held in October 1996, was sponsored by CNR, the Italian national research council.³¹ A newspaper reporter covering the event interviewed Italian demographer Antonio Golini, who used alarmist language as he discussed the “inescapable” progressive aging of the Italian population. He predicted some 400 *comuni* (counties) would be eliminated in the course of 34 years due to minimum population requirements. “The very low fertility of Italian women,” Golini maintained, “assures a generational exchange that is well below 40 percent of that which would insure zero growth.” He suggested that the only solution to the problem of a rapidly rising median age of the population is to increase fertility from “only 1.1 actual children per couple to 2.” The journalist took Golini to task for making statements that always “wake up the ghost of Italian extinction.” The reporter cited a non-Italian demographer’s estimate of an ideal population for Italy of 21 million rather than 57 million to achieve optimal quality of life given available resources, and then asked, “Isn’t it a little premature considering the problems of the survival of the earth?” Golini offered the following reply:³²

Effettivamente se abbiamo un’ottica mondiale non c’è nessun problema. Se la popolazione italiana cala in fretta arrivano gli immigrati e amen. Ma non possiamo fermarci a questo. Io studio la civiltà maya e come mi dispiace della sua comparsa mi può dispiacere che scompaia la cultura italiana o quella europea.

Effectively if we have a global view there is no problem. If the Italian population declines quickly, the immigrants will arrive and amen. But we cannot stop at this. I study Mayan civilization and just as I regret their disappearance, I can regret it if the Italian or European culture were to disappear.
[*L’Unità* 1996]

Golini implies that immigrants are not capable of carrying forth the Italian civilization. His discourse, as well as Bindi’s, plays on social memory and indexes Italians as the bearers of a unique humanism. The implication is that certain genetic types (the ones that would lie in those empty cradles) are required to carry forth this civilizational legacy. This type of logic is what Angel-Ajani

(2000:334), drawing on Malcomson (1995) and Gilroy (1991), has predicted: "A Euro-racial ideal may be created not only by legal means but through notions of cultural exclusivity that conflate race and nation to the point where racial others are deemed incompatible with European culture."³³ Although the media have a powerful role in perpetuating alarmist sentiments of incompatibility, demographers, as the scientific authorities, occupy a crucial position in terms of constructing discourses to further the project of increasing the birth-rate of Italian women.

Incentive programs (most of which are local) for augmenting the birthrate are meant to stimulate births of Italian nationals, not births to non-Europeans. For example, a pronatalist program proposed in May 1999 in Milan offered monthly payments of one million lire to residents, but only those who had lived in the city for at least 15 years. The article, without any evidence of actual immigrant birthrates, noted that "In the shadow of the Madonna shrine are *gli stranieri* (foreigners), who continue to procreate while the Milanese, due to choice or economic difficulty, seem always less enthusiastic to confront the prospect of having a family" (*La Repubblica* 1999). That the *stranieri* are described as in the shrine's shadow suggests they are not potential beneficiaries of the "blessings" of the madonna, in other words, a metaphoric reference to the local administration; this figure also plays on the presupposition that non-Europeans are also non-Catholic. The Left accused the proposal as being anti-constitutional and having a racist odor (1999).

There is, however, ambiguity in the current construction of Italian-ness. On the one hand, Southern Italians are counted along with Northern Italians to calculate national birthrates and to create a sense of an imagined community, of a homogeneous Italian "race."³⁴ On the other hand, demographic statistics, reported in the media, highlight differences between North and South. Consider this newspaper portrait of the nation following the release of national statistics:

The changing Italy remains in fact tenaciously equal to itself in inequities, with a Mezzogiorno that chases after the North, which is by now aligned with the most advanced models of the industrialized West. From birthrates to occupation, from exports to consumption, the statistics seem to illustrate two different countries. [Il *Sole 24 Ore* 1995]

Such divisions between the North and the South reverberate throughout xenophobic movements, such as the political rhetoric of the separatist party *Lega Nord* (Northern League) described by immigration scholars as among the "new political entrepreneurs of intolerance . . . [who have] proved capable of exploiting the immigration issue in order to gain political support" (Petrillo 1999:244). The League, at the beginning of the 1990s, argued that "the foreign invasion jeopardizes internal unity and the very identity of our people." A platform of superiority relied on old us-them dichotomies: "between natives and immigrants, between '*padani*' [northerners] and southern Italians" (quoted in Petrillo 1999:245). Xenophobic movements and, more subtly, national statistics echo the biological differences identified more than a century past in positivist criminologists' accounts.

Conclusions

I have moved this article between different levels of analysis, from the powerful constructions of knowledge undertaken by demographers, to media representations of this knowledge, and to the everyday experiences and perceptions of the subjects of demographic analysis: Italians and immigrants.

In Italy, demographers, politicians, and reporters have succeeded in making the body politic keenly aware of the low birthrate. Academic and state-sponsored elites deploy alarmist language and play on powerful metaphors—such as war on the one hand, loss of civil society on the other—to convince the public that the birthrate is too low. Magazine articles, cartoons, newspaper reports, books, and internet sites attest to the diffuse popular perception of Italy's self-consciousness about a demographic trend that has put "the two-child model into crisis," as the one-child family moves in as substitute (Menniti et al. 1997:239).

Demographic writings carry weight because of their authorship by demographers, who are *authorized* to speak scientifically about population.³⁵ The proliferation of demographic studies on the low birthrate is a type of knowledge production that serves as a sneaky sort of pronatalism; by not blatantly advocating specific measures to increase births, they avoid uncomfortable ties to the fascist demographic campaign of the 1920s and 1930s.³⁶ Framing the trend as an alarming problem nevertheless involves engaging in a politics of cultural struggle in which the concrete history of the quiet revolution is forgotten. The depiction of the birthrate as a problem denies rational agency especially to women and accuses them of failing their civilization. In addition, the prolific commentary about the low birthrate ensures that the quiet revolution is ongoing. In the context of a tightening European Union, and of Italy's change from a sending to a receiving country in terms of immigration, one can see how the official demographic project participates in the sort of war of position that Gramsci suggested occurs with hegemonic projects: an effort to raise consciousness aims to construct new grounds to stand on (Brackette Williams, personal communication 1994). I would like to suggest that the "problem" of the low birthrate and the "project" to remedy it are driven by nationalistic goals, ones that have become complicated and perhaps even more "urgent" against the backdrop of global movements of people into Italy as well as Italy's frontier location in Fortress Europe. Meanwhile, central Italians navigate the material conditions of a postwar context. Adjustments in family making are related to a newly defined global market economy, which has reconfigured identities rooted in articulations of gender, class, and race/ethnicity. The Italians living in central Italy and their non-European immigrant neighbors contend with a re-defined context in which old and new forms of racism cross-fertilize. Prolific knowledge about the low birthrate and the persistent characterization of it as an alarming problem empower "racializing discourses" that contribute to the everyday re-production of racism.³⁷

My analytic journey therefore suggests that demographers have embraced a "national" project of raising awareness among the population about key

demographic trends and moving them to believe the birthrate is a problem with the goal of changing behavior. This tactic constitutes an effort to get the population to consent to a new hegemonic project of the state. This project, however, competes with another one: a hegemonic attitude toward family size that has led couples all over Europe to have small families.

In October 1998, I heard Bill Bradley remark in a speech to a U.S. oil industry association that by the year 2050, "white" Americans will be the minority. "It's demography. It's not ideology," he said, advocating a pluralistic society that "takes more and more people to higher ground." Later, I overheard an audience member make a tasteless, horrific comment: that there would be need for another holocaust. The remark reminded me of a central conviction: demography has a long and involved political history in terms of assisting in the management and control of populations. Our task, then, becomes to critically examine purportedly scientific demographic discourses with the goal of recognizing and exposing the ideological and political-hegemonic ends to which such demographic knowledge and claims may be put.³⁸ In this article I have tried to demonstrate how demographic discourses in Italy easily become fodder for anti-immigrant alarmism as well as for depicting women as irrational subjects who are not fulfilling their role as the ultimate reproducers of the nation. More work needs to be done on the silences that underpin the quiet revolution.

Notes

Acknowledgments. This article traces its genesis to the "Racism as Culture" roundtable organized by Jane Hill for the Comparative Culture and Literary Studies Conference at the University of Arizona, February 27, 1998. Later incarnations were presented during the American Anthropological Association panel, "Toward a Critical Anthropology of Population," co-organized by David Kertzer and myself as an Executive Program Committee Invited Session on December 3, 1998 in Philadelphia; at a public talk at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Department of Anthropology, February 22, 2000; and at a public lecture to The Working Group on Anthropology and Population at Brown University on April 20, 2001. I am grateful to audience responses received in each of those public contexts and to comments by AAA discussants Susan Greenhalgh and Jane Schneider. I also value interactions with the AAA panel participants, with whom I shared a plan, which never materialized, to publish our collective articles together. My thanks extend to Hermann Rebel, Ana Alonso, Jane Hill, Susan Philips, and Mark Nichter for comments on earlier drafts of this article. This article has benefited enormously from the insights of anonymous reviewers for *Cultural Anthropology* and the journal's persistently attentive editor, Dan Segal. I am grateful for transcription and translation assistance from Antonella del Conte, Luciana Fellin, and Matilde Zampi; my understandings were also enriched by our conversations. Italian colleagues Massimo Bressan, anthropologist, and Giovanni Contini, oral historian, offered support and insights throughout the project, as did numerous other organic intellectuals from my field site. My appreciation goes out to Massimo Livi-Bacci, who graciously met with me and provided access to the statistics library at the Università degli Studi di Firenze, where many important Italian demography sources are held. The hard work of demographers informs my research even as I write critically about it. Research funds for ethnographic fieldwork (October 1995–August 1997 and June 1999) were provided by

a Council for European Studies Pre-Dissertation Grant, a U.S. Fulbright Grant and Renewal, and a Final Project Fund Award from The University of Arizona (Krause 1999). This litany of acknowledgments aside, I accept full responsibility for any shortcomings with the caveat that any work is always in progress.

1. Contrary to popular usage, the demographic term *fertility* refers to the number of live births women on average have in a certain population. When demographers speak of declines in fertility, they do *not* mean increases in infertility or decreases in fecundity (the ability to have children) but, rather, declines in births.

2. My concept of hegemony draws heavily on Gramsci's notion (1971) as later developed by Rebel (1989), Roseberry (1994), B. Williams (1991), and R. Williams (1977).

3. I conducted doctoral field research from October 1995 to August 1997 with a follow-up visit during June 1999.

4. Giacomo Becattini, an economist well-known for the social flavor he lends to analyses of industrial development in Tuscany, particularly Prato's postwar industrial district, draws our attention to the "economic self-assertion by individuals" (Becattini 1998:83) that characterized people's entry into industry. On the one hand, small-scale, diffuse industry meant cheap labor; on the other, it meant that many more people could be their own bosses, but I would add only problematically so since the autonomy of individuals within a firm depended on their subject position. In his attempt to untie the "knotty" situation that led to economic development in Tuscany—against a moderate, 19th-century antidevelopment political leadership—Becattini views the *mezzadria* (sharecroppers) as crucial. He suggests that mounting tensions led to a "peasant protest, particularly by women and youth, not so much against the countryside itself as against the rigidity of the pecking-order in the family and against their close economic dependence on its older male members" (Becattini 1998:83). The powers of decision making and the availability of income were "inconsistent with the distribution of workload, capacity and responsibility" (Becattini 1986:908, my translation). Peasants, according to Becattini, began objecting to a social structure and ideology that permitted, even necessitated, an unfair distribution of duties and rights.

5. Everyday body ritual among Americans was made to appear unfamiliar and strange in Horace Miner's now classic Nacirema culture (Miner 1956). With a parallel objective, I wish to make us question the "naturalness" of statistical practices to see that they, too, are socially and historically constructed.

6. On the "hot" Italian economy, see Friedman 1997. Historian Paul Ginsborg writes, "By the late 1980s Italy claimed to have overtaken Britain, to become the fifth largest industrial nation of the Western world, after the United States, Japan, West Germany, and France. Giovanni Goria, then Treasury Minister, first made this claim in January 1987. It has been hotly disputed ever since" (1990:408). See also Italian Journal 1988 (1):31–48.

7. See <http://pbs.org/sixbillion>.

8. This article examines the following texts: Golini 1991, 1994; Golini et al. 1995; ISTAT 1995, 1996a; Livi-Bacci 1994; Lori et al. 1995; Palomba 1991; Palomba et al. 1987; Volpi 1996. I located several of these sources at the Statistics Library of the Università di Firenze. Dr. Livi-Bacci graciously gave me permission to use the library in the Department of Statistics and provided me with the names of important Italian demographers whose work informed my research. I shared with Dr. Livi-Bacci the abstract of a paper entitled "Writing Against Demography" (Krause 1996), and hence made him aware of my critical sensibilities. We are both well aware of the difficult challenge of

interdisciplinary work between demography and sociocultural anthropology though valiant attempts have been made recently (see edited volumes by Greenhalgh 1995; Kertzer and Fricke 1997). I am also aware that much of my knowledge about the structure of Italian society would not be possible without the statistically-grounded, hard work of demographers.

9. On indexicality, see in particular Ochs (1990) as well as Silverstein (1976) and Mertz (1985). Ochs' distinction between direct and indirect indexicality has been fruitfully developed by Hill (1999:683), who has applied it to her work on Mock Spanish. She suggests nonnative Spanish speakers' use of Mock Spanish directly indexes the speaker's "congenial persona"; however, indirectly the usage indexes pejorative aspects that are essentially racist and never acknowledged.

10. This language was common to the Princeton Fertility Project (see Coale and Watkins 1986). Such dichotomies between modern/rational and traditional/irrational appear in Livi-Bacci (1977:244, 257), which Schneider and Schneider have discussed (1991:891). Note the assumption of rationality in Livi-Bacci's description of the fertility of five villages in central Italy from the 17th to 19th centuries compared with Hutterite fertility in 1921–30: "The fertility of the five villages is sensibly lower than that of the Hutterites, but within the normal range found in the studies concerning populations of the 17th to 19th centuries, and still apparently untouched by voluntary control of fertility" (Livi-Bacci 1977:13). The Hutterites are the population whose known maximum fertility rates led it to be used in the Princeton Fertility Project; fertility of a given population was presented as a percentage of the Hutterites' since it was the highest on record (Livi-Bacci 1977:56). Furthermore, that demographers viewed "controlled" fertility as "rational" fertility is clear in statements such as the following: "Six children per woman are, undoubtedly, a heavy burden," (Livi-Bacci 1977:90). Looking back from how children in Italy in the 1970s or 1990s are reared, yes, six seems burdensome. But a 19th-century peasant woman in a rigid hierarchical system of patriarchy lived according to a different set of affective and caretaking relations, and six children meant something very different in the 1870s than it did in the 1970s (see Barbagli 1988:25; Saraceno 1996:145). Disciplinary frameworks can blind us from the logics of specific cultural systems.

11. These notions are based in linear evolutionary modernization models, as Greenhalgh (1995a:5–6) discusses. See also Greenhalgh's essay on the history of demographic science (1996).

12. When I delivered an earlier draft of this article at the University of Massachusetts in February 2000, I was blatantly pregnant and well into my 34th week of gestation. I interrupted the question, "Who is engaging in this hard refusal to procreate if not women?" with an under-the-breath "obviously not me." I felt then, as I do now, that this jocular moment broke some kind of tension related to a *perceived* discrepancy between discourse (what I was saying) and practice (what my body was showing). The scene played on the very critique of rationality I have tried to make throughout this article.

13. I have only ever seen female cohorts used to calculate standard demographic indicators, such as total fertility rate. This term refers to the average number of children born to a woman during her lifetime. See the glossary of the Population Reference Bureau or the 2000 World Population Data Sheet, <http://www.prb.org>.

14. See Wolf 1982, in particular chapter 3, in which he defines capitalist, tributary, and kin-ordered modes of production as the three modes that offer utility for revealing "the strategic relationships involved in the deployment of social labor by organized human pluralities" (1982:76).

15. After I wrote this, I came across Arturo Escobar's phrasing of a similar idea: "Foucault's work on the dynamics of discourse and power in representation of social reality, in particular, has been instrumental in unveiling the mechanisms by which a certain order of discourse produces permissible modes of being and thinking while disqualifying and even making others impossible" (Escobar 1995:5).

16. An interesting discussion of the policy implications of feminist and neo-Malthusian alliances can be found in Hodgson and Watkins (1997).

17. Pescarolo (1991:35) details the labor strikes of 1896.

18. Archivio del Comune di Carmignano, Censimento Generale della Popolazione del Regno D'Italia, Provincia di Firenze, Frazione di Poggio A Caiano, 1901.

19. This idea is expressed in Geertz's (1988:84) analysis of the shock waves that reverberated after the publication of Malinowski's diaries in 1967.

20. Taylor and Rebel (1981) offer an excellent discussion of peasant interpretations. Their detailed symbolic analysis of folk tales suggests the telling of tales were peasant women's responses to family disruption in the face of the state's drafting of their disinherited sons. See also Roseberry's (1989:27–28) discussion of their analysis.

21. Italians are highly aware of the declining birthrate and have been at least since the early 1980s. Results of a comparative survey conducted between 1983–84 in Italy and the Netherlands found that 93 percent of the Italians and 63 percent of the Dutch knew that the birthrate had been declining. The more aware a population was of declining birthrates, the more it viewed the trend negatively. The study's authors underscored this important difference: In Italy, about 2.5 times as many respondents evaluated the birth decline negatively; in the Netherlands, there was a very high percentage of people (40 percent versus 10 percent in Italy) who were "indifferent to the problem." (Palomba et al. 1987:8). The findings were published by the Council of Europe and affiliated with the European Population Committee, whose stated goal is to "promote better understanding of demographic implications at all levels of political decision making."

22. The noun *gente* means people, and the suffix *-ella* indicates a negative, a lack. In this particular context, the word indexes material lack and likely points to a peasant past, a time in which commodities and education were scarce.

23. The so-called Southern Question, which in the 19th century was framed as a question of racial inferiority, has been a topic of discussion in Italy since the Italian nation was unified in 1861. As Gramsci noted,

The poverty of the Mezzogiorno was historically "inexplicable" for the popular masses in the North; they did not understand that the unity had not taken place on a basis of equality, but as hegemony of the North over the Mezzogiorno in a territorial version of the town-country relationship—in other words, that the North concretely was an "octopus" which enriched itself at the expense of the South, and that its economic-industrial increment was in direct proportion to the impoverishment of the economy and the agriculture of the South. [Gramsci 1971:70–71]

So, the Northerner reasoned, if the Southerners hadn't been able to improve their economic condition after liberation from the Bourbons, this meant the causes of poverty were to be found in some innate deficiencies. Continues Gramsci: "There only remained one explanation—the organic incapacity of the inhabitants, their barbarity, their biological inferiority" (1971:71). Nineteenth-century sociologists of positivism led credence to such biological-determinist popular positions with their scientific claims of truths. "Thus a polemic arose between North and South on the subject of race." Gramsci writes, "and about the superiority or inferiority of North and South" (Gramsci 1971:70–71).

24. Elsewhere (Krause 1998), I use a discourse-centered approach to analyze racism and compare in greater depth the "new" racism against non-European immigrants

and “old” forms of racism against Southern Italians. I originally explored this theme in a 1995 seminar on “Language and Racism” with Jane Hill at the University of Arizona; see Hill 1993 and 1999. Recent works in English on Italian racism are Carter 1997, and Cole 1998. In Italian, see Palanca 1999. Gramsci (1971:70–71) discusses notions of “biological inferiority” and makes convincing links to 19th-century positivist sociology and the Southern question.

25. Public opinion about demographic events “is very much influenced” by daily newspapers and periodicals, according to Palomba and Righi (1993:10), authors of a booklet that examines media reportage of demographic trends.

26. Some scholars writing on racism in Europe have used the term neo-racism (see in particular Balibar 1991a, 1991b) to distinguish between old and new forms, the latter glossed as somehow more “polite” because of supposed grounding in cultural differences and relatively less vulgar discourse; other scholars, however, have sought to avoid using an old versus new distinction because they perceive no fundamental difference between the various forms of racism (Miles 1993). Sorting out the debates over old and new forms of racism is beyond the scope of this article.

27. Interview originally published in *L'Espresso*, July 1990.

28. For an overview of migration in Italy, see Petrillo 1999; di Maio 2001 offers a compassionate view of Italian immigrants through recent immigrant literature.

29. Thanks to Massimo Bressan, anthropologist and former director of IRIS, Istituto di Ricerche e Interventi Sociali, a social-economic research institute in Prato, for providing me with this article.

30. I first read this phrase in Cuddihy 1987.

31. The acronym stands for Consiglio nazionale delle ricerche.

32. *L'Unità*, October 29, 1996. “Allarme dei demografi: a causa della natalità sotto zero spariranno centinaia di cittadine italiane; Solo vecchi, via 400 paesi” and “Vecchi, pochi e spreconi” were the headlines for the articles on the population conference.

33. My thanks to Enoch Page for this reference.

34. The well-known phrase “imagined community” comes from Anderson (1991). There is by now a rich literature on the anthropology of ethnicity and the nation-state. The review essay by Alonso (1994) provides an excellent entry point.

35. In an essay exploring how knowledge is constructed in science, Joan Fujimura points out, “The stakes in the authoritarian battles are high” (1998:357). A fascinating case of the political use of statistics can be found in the language and culture struggles of the Basque country (Urla 1993). My critical reading of the way demographers represent populations has undeniably been shaped by Foucault (1972, 1978).

36. A great deal of scholarship has been produced on the fascist demographic campaign. See de Grazia 1992; Horn 1994; Krause 1994; Passerini 1987; Whitaker 2000.

37. In an effort to contribute to the “untangling of the complexity of racism,” Hill (1999:681) suggests that we explore questions such as, “What are the different kinds of racializing discourses?” and “in what kinds of contexts” do they occur? I came across her questions as I was revising this article and was reconvinced by my own argument that demographic discourses now circulating in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, as well as in the United States, have powerful racializing effects. See the *New York Times* 1998.

38. This goal does not preclude collaborations that have recently been suggested between demographers and anthropologists (e.g., Hammel and Friou 1997; Kertzer 1997; Kertzer and Fricke 1997). It does, however, require that such collaborations allow for critical reflection.

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