Book Review of Population Policy and Reproduction in Singapore

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makeovers. Accordingly, whether devised by either local campaigns or movement advocates, successful political strategies are likely to orbit increasingly around those social and demographic trends.


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Singapore is a demographically and economically unique country. The total fertility rate, a reflection of current childbearing trends measured as the average number of children a woman can expect to have in her lifetime, reached replacement level in 1977, and continued to decline from that point onwards. It currently stands at just 1.2, well below the 2.1 children per woman needed to maintain a constant population size. Economically, the country is an Asian “tiger” that went from poverty at the time of independence in 1965 to today having one of the highest GDPs per capita in the world. This rapid economic growth was fostered by a developmentalist and productivist state that actively invested in human capital to increase economic productivity and opened its borders to international capital. It is at this intersection, between the demographic and the economic, that Shirley Sun’s book is situated.

Worried about maintaining economic growth as well as the nation’s capacity to defend itself, the government of Singapore, since the late-1980s, has promulgated increasingly expansive pronatalist population policies. Yet baby bonuses, tax rebates, and childcare subsidies have failed to increase fertility. The book asks why, and couches the response within the literature of citizenship studies. The core analytic chapters and conclusions are based on 165 semi-structured interviews and 39 focus groups with Singaporean citizens of different educational, ethnic, and economic backgrounds about their opinions on childbearing, the government’s policies, and the relationship between the two.

Population Policy and Reproduction in Singapore makes three main contributions. First, the majority of respondents reported that they would ideally like to have more than one child, indicating that the desired fertility of citizens actually matches the desired fertility of the state. Second, Sun’s data convincingly show that the lack of effectiveness of the pronatalist policy efforts is in large part because they simply do not do enough to offset the cost of children. Life is expensive in Singapore, and children particularly so. Although the government subsidizes education, being “successful” by Singaporean standards requires extensive, out-of-pocket parental contributions to tutors, classes, and other extracurricular activities, and there is significant competition for the best schools. Similarly, although 80 percent of Singaporeans live in subsidized housing, the cost of this housing continues to increase and they still feel financially constrained. Tax rebates, which make up one portion of the pronatalist policies, are known about and relevant only to those within the higher income brackets. And again, they are not sufficiently large to encourage people to have more children. Paid maternity leave, although increased in recent years, stands at only 12 weeks. In short, the state’s policies are not doing enough to overcome the cost of living, children, and time. Third, Sun identifies a pattern noted among many low-fertility European countries, specifically that increasing gender equality in the workplace has not been accompanied by change in gender roles in the home. Men continue to assume it is their responsibility to be the breadwinner, and although labor force participation among women with children is on par with the United States, United Kingdom, and other wealthy countries, many of these working women would prefer to stay home. Importantly, “career-oriented” women (those who wish to have children and work), complain not about the minimal extent of maternity leave, but instead about the absence of legal safeguards against job loss while on maternity leave. Across the board, then, the benefits offered by the government are insufficient to lead Singaporeans to achieve their desired fertility.

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In addition to these findings about the factors driving the lack of success of pronatalist policy in Singapore, the book offers several useful elements to the scholar of population policy or to someone teaching on the topic. Chapter Two provides a nice summary of the literature on the impact of pronatalist population policies on fertility outcomes, drawing from northern European and Asian countries. For those who are specifically interested in Singapore’s population policy, or in the details of population policy in specific contexts, Chapter Two and Appendix A provide a comprehensive history of the exact amounts of baby bonus schemes, changes in parental leave, and other subsidies and rebates provided to encourage fertility over time. The 2008 government pamphlet reproduced on pages 33–34, “Marriage and Parenthood Package,” provides wonderful insight into the government’s efforts. Among other things, it depicts cartoon parents with three-baby strollers and provides contact information for government-sponsored matchmaking services.

Although rich in detail about the population policy, as well as the various funds set up by the Singaporean government for retirement, education, housing, and health, the book’s ultimate contribution to citizenship studies could have been more fully expressed. In particular, while Sun is right to point out that, “the making of future citizens is a joint enterprise—the reproduction of the nation at the state level, and family planning at the individual level” (p. 8), the empirical component of the book does not address the reproduction of the nation. Indeed, while Sun’s interviews reveal Singaporean’s desires for greater government support for childbearing, and that many feel their jobs are threatened by foreign workers, they speak very little to questions of national identity or citizenship. Furthermore, while Sun clearly describes the state’s creation of a disciplined population of workers in the background chapters, it would have been interesting to further address (perhaps with reference to Foucault) how the level of discipline may actually limit the state’s capacity to manage reproduction. Thus while the “state regards citizens as human resources” (p. 16) for sure, this view has not yet pushed the government to fund pronatalist programs sufficiently to increase fertility. There are also many places in the book, both in the presentation of the literature as well as the results from the interviews, where it would have been nice to hear more of Sun’s own voice, as opposed to providing direct quotations.

The lingering question at the end of the book is whether the government of Singapore can actually increase fertility through policy mechanisms. Sun describes the overall ethos in Singapore as “welfare is primarily the citizen’s responsibility, not the state’s” (p. 40). The implication from the most “successful” examples of pronatalist population policy in northern Europe—where massive government expenditure has increased total fertility rates by fractions of a birth—is that the Singaporean state would have to switch to seeing citizens’ welfare as its own responsibility in order to increase fertility. Doing so would be a major shift from the stance it has taken since independence in 1965, but short of increasing immigration yet further, might be necessary in order to ensure Singapore’s continued economic success.