

Tradition, Modernity, and Italian Babies

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While demography has made many valuable contributions to the analysis of contemporary demographic reversals, the discipline seems as far as ever from explaining the dynamics of fertility change. Commentaries on “populations” routinely link fertility control and small families with progress, modernity, and western values; in “traditional” societies, fertility regulation is left to chance, God, and custom. However, countries such as Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Italy, which score relatively high on various indicators of “tradition”, have recently registered fertility rates far below the level of their more “advanced” neighbours. The same appears to be true of Italian immigrants in Australia. Italians are often depicted as traditional people recently confronted by modernity and painfully coming to terms with its liberating potential. In conducting detailed studies of specific communities, however, anthropologists, historians, and other scholars provide what are arguably more empirically accurate explanations of procreative behaviour: ones based on discontinuities, alternative strategies, mutual dependencies and exploitations, and diverse rationalities and traditions, cultures, and economies.

Si la démographie a maintes fois et largement contribué à l'analyse des renversements démographiques contemporains, la discipline ne semble pas plus en mesure que jamais d'expliquer la dynamique de l'évolution de la fécondité. Les commentaires sur les « populations » associent régulièrement le contrôle des naissances et les petites familles au progrès, à la modernité et aux valeurs occidentales. Dans les sociétés « traditionnelles », le contrôle des naissances est laissé à la chance, à Dieu ainsi qu'aux us et coutumes. Cependant, des pays tels que l'Espagne, le Portugal, la Grèce et l'Italie, qui obtiennent des notes relativement élevées aux divers indicateurs de la « tradition », ont récemment enregistré des taux de fécondité bien inférieurs à ceux de leurs voisins « avancés ». Il semble en aller de même pour les immigrants italiens en Australie. Les Italiens sont souvent dépeints comme des gens traditionnels s'étant récemment éveillés à la modernité et composant douloureusement avec son potentiel libérateur. Cependant, la réalisation d'études détaillées de

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certaines communautés par les anthropologues, les historiens et d'autres chercheurs fournit des explications, que d'aucuns qualifieront de plus empiriques, du comportement procréateur fondées sur des discontinuités, des stratégies de rechange, les dépendances et les exploitations mutuelles et diverses raisons, traditions, cultures et économies.

We're a modern couple, we have no need for children.... Any idiot can have children, but it's better to have none.¹

What kind of society cannot even reproduce itself? The answer is our form of free market society.²

[T]otal fertility rates of about 1.3 in Central Europe ... are a sign of social pathology that would seem to call for energetic countermeasures.³

FEMINISTS and others have for many years argued that “women” do not exist as a self-evident category, let alone all have the same interests and political agendas, as many believed in the 1970s. Are there, then, some other groupings that make sense? How would one theorize such phenomena? How do the identifying practices of social science and public administration interact with social solidarities? This is not merely a taxonomic question: if feminists want to formulate viable social policies and win political struggles, they need to have a shrewd assessment of the circumstances, needs, solidarities, and divisions of their constituencies.

This discussion grows out of my previous work on historical transformations of patriarchy and my more recent curiosity about contemporary gender regimes.⁴ I approached the larger question of contemporary gender regimes by focusing on some aspects of the bearing and raising of children, and began by examining one group — people of Italian descent — routinely identified as distinct by commentators both in Australia and internationally. I chose Italians because they constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in Australia, and because I have a basic understanding of standard Italian. While I have taken great care to be accurate, I make no claim to be an “Italian” scholar, a

1 East Prussian landlord, early 1900s, quoted in P. R. Galloway *et al.*, “Fertility Decline in Prussia”, *Population Studies*, vol. 48 (1994), p. 135.

2 P. McDonald, “Institutional Support for Australian Families” (paper presented to the Centenary of Federation Seminar Series, Parliament House, Canberra, October 4, 2000).

3 P. Demeny, “Pro-natalist Policies in Low-fertility Countries: Patterns, Performance, and Prospects”, in K. Davis *et al.*, eds, *Below-replacement Fertility in Industrial Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 341.

4 My book *Transformations of Patriarchy in the West, 1500–1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), as well as theorizations of gender regimes in journals such as *Social Politics*, are part of broad-based attempts to get away from essentialist notions of gender relations, not least by theorizing different historical forms of male-dominated social orders, with different articulations of gender, age, and class relations.

demographer, or a statistician — or to map out comprehensive overviews of the literatures I use.

In one of the most frequently debated passages of his work, Michel Foucault claimed that the spread of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century would not have been possible without the invention of new ways of controlling people. New technologies of production could not prevail without new technologies of the body and of populations; industrial and population thinking had a lot in common.⁵ Australia, one of the white colonial settlements established on expropriated indigenous lands, from the very beginning confronted “the accumulation of men” in an even more fundamental way. Settlers, convicts, officials, and troops needed to be shipped halfway around the world, financed, fed, selected, policed, allocated. Indigenous peoples needed to be conquered, imagined to fit into a western legal framework, rendered “useful”. As viable settler communities were established, desirable immigrants needed to be attracted and unwanted ones kept out. In a nation of immigrants concerned with adequate and appropriate population size, both immigration and natural increase have remained on the political agenda; competing understandings of (differential) fertility rates continue to play a significant role in public policy.

Recently, Foucauldian analyses of population thinking became one of the key departure points for new theoretical concerns with constitution of “the social”.⁶ The social pertains to a knowable population; it refers both to a terrain of intervention and a form of rationality. Demography supplies some of the key coordinates of such knowledge. As other contributors to this collection note, it both distills influential understandings of its subject matter and creates new ones. In its promise to supply “facts”, demography helps map the social. In its attempts to explain and to predict the dynamics of population increase, demography has the potential to allow us to grasp the fundamental principles of the lawful physiognomy of the social organism.

This is a significant and remarkably ambitious promise. If fulfilled, it could link the most intimate of human sentiments and practices with the most lofty matters of state, the most private with the most public concerns. It could elucidate why gender relations and the family appear to be in crisis. Sex, love, marriage, birthing, and the nurture of babies could be articulated with taxation, education, employment and immigration policy, debates about national character, even superpower politics and global sustainability. If there are few babies and many old people, a shrinking number of the “economically active” might need to be taxed more to support an ever-growing population of the elderly. If immigrants supplement a shrinking native-born population, established understandings of national character, with all their attendant privileges and exclusions, might need to be rethought. If peoples of

5 M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1979), pp. 220–221.

6 See, for example, D. G. Horn, *Social Bodies: Science, Reproduction and Italian Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

the developing world continue to grow and those of the wealthiest countries diminish in numbers, demands for world redistribution of power and resources are likely to intensify. If demographers discovered what causes babies, Foucault's bold vision would reach a hitherto unattainable level of perfection.

Demography is rarely seen as such an exciting site of social productivity, not least because fertility trends stubbornly resist understanding. As one prominent demographer put it, "[T]he precipitous decline of Italian fertility was a surprise to demographers, and it remains inadequately explained." According to another, "[T]he fertility decline started around 1965, almost simultaneously in every country, and took everyone by surprise."⁷ While at times, such as in debates about the "Third World population bomb", demographers have played an influential role in public policy, their more widely accepted role is to supply facts for others to interpret.⁸ For many purposes, of course, this distinction does not matter. As Poovey notes, attempts to *describe* inevitably involve attempts to *constitute*; both contribute to productivity of particular notions of the social.

What follows is a reflective piece relevant to considerations both of the social and of gender regimes. It focuses on the way notions of tradition and modernity have been employed in explanations of fertility among Italians in Italy and Australia. In this complex terrain, one issue stands out. Commentaries on "populations" routinely link fertility control and small families with progress, modernity, and western values. In "traditional" societies, the Malthusian calculus hardly applies and fertility regulation is left to chance, God, and custom. In contrast, the modern man, the ideal "social" unit, exerts rational control over his animal passions, defers gratification, plans for the future, has a clear notion of self-interest yet finds worth and dignity in civic duties, has a proud sense of history but is not shackled by outmoded tradition. Guided by his foresight though herself lacking in rationality, overflowing with altruism but unfit for public office, emancipated yet feminine, his wife has just the right number of children.

The problem is that some combinations of these sterling qualities seem to reduce fertility to undesirable levels, or even eliminate the need for children altogether. For over a century, the most exemplary members of the professional classes have been castigated for having too few offspring, those captive to tradition for breeding like rabbits. The most modern women, it seems, break the shackles of patriarchal tradition and lifelong reproduction, leave behind altruism for the individual pursuit of happiness, enter the paid work force, and make pregnancy the subject of deliberation. Scrutinizing their

7 J.-C. Chesnais, "Fertility, Family, and Social Policy in Contemporary Western Europe", *Population and Development Review*, vol. 22, no. 4 (1996), p. 736; J. Bourgeois-Pichat, "The Unprecedented Shortage of Births in Europe" in Davis *et al.*, eds., *Below-replacement Fertility*, p. 5.

8 P. Demeny, "Social Science and Population Policy", *Population and Development Review*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1988), pp. 451-479.

options, the rational choice theories, which have become increasingly prominent in fertility research in the last 20 years, seem at a loss to explain why anyone under current circumstances would have any children at all in the absence of significant pro-natalist incentives, save from miscalculation.⁹ To complicate things further, countries such as Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Italy, which score relatively high on various indicators of “tradition”, have recently registered fertility rates far below the level of their more “advanced” neighbours. The same appears to be true of Italian immigrants in Australia.

In 1995 the total fertility rate in Italy, at around 1.17, was among the lowest in the world (the notional replacement level is 2.1). If the rate remained at this level for a century and there was no immigration, the population of Italy would drop to 14 per cent of its initial size. In Australia, the fertility rate of women of Italian origin was below that of most other ethnic groups and, at around 1.5, approximated that of Italy.¹⁰ In both cases, higher than average twentieth-century fertility rates have recently given way to very low ones. While some demographers see this as “an interesting coincidence”,¹¹ others believe the parallel findings are due to the distinctive cultural traits of Italian families. Initially, scholars attempted to attribute what they saw as the distinct behaviour of Italians to belated modernization. For an influential group of contemporary demographers, in contrast, Mediterranean women in general and Italian women in particular have fewer children because that is the only practical way of maintaining traditional values in a modern world.

Modernization Theory

The above sketch derives much of its logic from modernization theory, a particularly influential late-twentieth-century form of population thinking. In 1973 Dean Tipps summarized the current state of modernization theory and its critiques.¹² In what is often referred to as a seminal article, he concluded that modernization theory failed the test of “telling us more about our subject than any other categorical sets” and should be abandoned. Modernization theory emerged in its present form in the United States following the Second World War, as a new generation of scholars embarked on study of societies for which there was no local tradition of inquiry. In the climate of the Cold War, Tipps noted, modernization theory provided an intellectual map which felt intuitively correct and promised useful purchase on significant policy issues. In this, it resembled the popularity of other theories justifying asym-

9 D. Friedman *et al.*, “Theories of the Value of Children: A New Approach” in R. Leete, ed., *Dynamics of Values in Fertility Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

10 P. F. McDonald, *Gender Equity, Social Institutions and the Future of Fertility* (Canberra: Research School of Social Sciences, Working Papers in Demography, Australian National University, 1997), p. 7.

11 S.-E. Khoo and J. Shu, *Immigrant Family Formation Patterns in Australia* (Canberra: Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, 1996), p. 8.

12 D. Tipps, “Modernisation Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1973), pp. 199–226.

metrical relationships between societies during the heyday of European colonialism. Written 30 years ago, Tipps's arguments continue to be relevant to literature on migration and fertility, in which Italians are often depicted as traditional people recently confronted by modernity and painfully coming to terms with its liberating potential.

Tipps distinguishes between two versions of modernization theory. One uses a measure of social change, such as urbanization or industrialization, as an indicator of modernization; the other conceptualizes modernization as a dichotomous process of transformation from traditional to modern societies. Summarizing critiques of this latter approach, Tipps distinguishes between three levels of argument. First, modernization theories are the product of an ethnocentric world view: there are many similarities with accounts of "barbarity" giving way to "civilization". Modernity is superior to tradition, and the progress of nations continues to be evaluated by their proximity to western, Anglo-American values and institutions. "Far from being a universally applicable schema for the study of the historical development of human societies," Tipps concludes, "the nature of modernisation theory reflects a particular phase in the development of a single society, that of the United States."¹³

The second form of critique refers to the erroneous empirical content of modernization theories. Since the notion of tradition was formulated not upon the basis of observation but rather as a hypothetical antithesis of modernity, "traditional societies" were assumed to have been static, with no history before the commencement of "modernization" upon contact with the west. Moreover, a vast range of societies in different regions and different times were thrown together in the category "traditional" merely on the basis of not being modern industrial societies. This has made it difficult to chart alternative paths to modernization or to analyse and acknowledge the fact that some forms of contact between regions or societies inhibit "modernization". It also makes it difficult to analyse the interplay between different forms of modernity and tradition within one society.

The final form of critique concerns methodological issues. Here, Tipps notes that the very comprehensiveness of modernization theory makes it difficult to pinpoint precisely what it is expected to explain. This is in part because the units of comparison are not identical. On the modern side, there are national territorial states; on the traditional side, civilizations, culture areas, empires, kingdoms, and tribes. More importantly, the theory is flawed at its heart because it assumes in the first place what it needs to demonstrate empirically: that there indeed is a process of continuous, progressive human evolution, comprehensible by means of a single scientific concept.

Critiques such as these have undermined the academic respectability of modernization theory. Yet, judging by the aims of a recent volume on the cultural turn in social sciences, little has changed. The editors consider that

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

one of the key contributions of the collection consists of a shared opposition to a “view of national culture as timeless tradition, internally coherent and shared equally by all members of the society”:

The notion of a universal historical trajectory is made explicit within social evolutionary and modernization theory; traditional Marxism, and systems theory; it is usually implicit wherever the terms *traditional* and *modern* are used without a specific chronological reference. Past cultural forms that fit poorly with “modern rationality” are lumped together in the category of “tradition”; and where the “traditional” cultures are contemporaneous, space is recorded as time.¹⁴

Whatever the case, more than two decades after Tipps’s paper was published, Greenhalgh noted that those outside demography continue to be struck — as I was — by the pervasiveness of modernization theory within the discipline.¹⁵ Her often-quoted article places emphasis on two key empirical assumptions. For my purposes, both constitute useful points of departure in commenting on Italians and demographic regimes. The first is that the histories of specific places are sufficiently alike to warrant theorizing them as moving at uneven pace along a linear and universal progression from “traditional” to “modern” societies. It follows that to consider regional and class variation is to abandon parsimony, elegance, and universality of explanation and to encumber the theory with colourful but irrelevant detail. The second assumption is that “advanced” societies and those which lag behind can be studied in isolation from each other, because their modernity or lack of it can be attributed to them alone. In other words, internal factors are deemed so methodologically important that even relatively intangible processes, such as the effect of schedules of breastfeeding on character formation, are worthy of study, but external factors, such as the balance of trade or mutual dependencies between countries, are deemed irrelevant. Importantly, Greenhalgh notes that, as a measure of a nation’s progress toward modernity, the “status of women” assumes particular importance. Western women, the argument goes, are the least oppressed by their menfolk, the most rational, the most self-possessed, the most in control of their bodies. It follows that modernization (and capitalism as its main driving force) are good for women, in spite of opposition from many “traditional” females.¹⁶

14 G. Steinmetz, “Introduction: Culture and the State” in G. Steinmetz, ed., *State/Culture: State Formation After the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 21.

15 S. Greenhalgh, “The Social Construction of Population Science: An Intellectual, Institutional, and Political History of Twentieth Century Demography”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 38, no. 1 (1996), p. 27.

16 Much of early feminist writing contained parallel assumptions regarding “foreign” countries and social groups. Such claims have become the object of extensive contestation, in sites ranging from international fora to remote village birth control clinics. See, for example, S. Corrêa, *Population and Reproductive Rights: Feminist Perspectives From the South* (London: Zed Books, 1994).

Greenhalgh's notes on gender are complemented by Scott's critique of the continuing influence of modernization theory within development studies. In her book, Scott takes up many of the points made by Tipps. Her distinct contribution is in showing how modernization theorists, who say almost nothing explicit about women, associate modernity and progress with men and masculinity, and tradition and barriers to modernity with women and the feminine. In doing so, they take up many of the gendered assumptions of particular forms of psychoanalytic theorizing.¹⁷

Family Size and Italians

Families of populations with similar family sizes may resemble one another in no other attribute. Family size is not a proxy for the way that families operate, or the way their members think: it is merely the characteristic of the family that demographers are most interested in, and the one with which [demographers] are best equipped to deal.¹⁸

Demographic transitions (or changes between high and low fertility regimes) have been theorized in a number of ways. One of the dominant models, well represented in the work of Tilly, revolves around a shift from social constraint to individual regulation, a move "from a society in which well-defined collective needs explain group-to-group variations in fertility while individual differences are matters of chance, impulse, and inclination, to a society in which collective needs set few constraints on fertility but individual calculation governs it very closely".¹⁹ Two variants of a more "culturalist" explanation involve contrast between customary and rational behaviour, or else a transformation from traditional to modern culture.

When Livi-Bacci, one of Italy's most eminent demographers, published his study of Italian fertility as part of the Princeton project, he concluded that Italy conformed rather closely to the classic pattern in Europe where birth rates fell when modernization occurred. As in other countries, he argued, the movement to lower fertility at the turn of the twentieth century was led by the wealthy, the more educated, and the urban dwellers, whereas the poor, the illiterate, and the rural populace lagged behind. In the south of Italy, "Attachment to traditions; a more extended and tightly knit family system; the stronger weight of social control; the lack of women's emancipation; the weight of the often very conservative teaching of the Church — these are some of the manifold factors of Southern culture [which] affect, in a degree

17 C. V. Scott, *Gender and Development: Rethinking Modernization Theory* (London: Lynne Reiner, 1995).

18 G. Santow and M. Bracher, "Traditional Families and Fertility Decline: Lessons from Australia's Southern Europeans" in Leete, ed., *Dynamics of Values in Fertility Change*.

19 C. Tilly, ed., *Historical Studies of Changing Fertility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 44.

not appreciably different, all sectors of the population without regard to income, profession or residence.”²⁰

There is now something of a consensus among demographic historians that the original hypotheses regarding the first demographic transition are untenable. The most comprehensive refutation of this theoretical model was supplied by work originally designed around its assumptions. The massive European Fertility Project, conducted for over 20 years by the Office of Population Research at Princeton University, mapped out a complex mosaic of fertility levels and trends in different provinces of Europe. Relying on aggregate statistics, the studies found that, while urbanization and industrialization played some role in accounting for local differences in fertility, they contributed little to explaining the timing of declines in specific localities. Fertility in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century fell at much the same time in rural Bulgaria and industrialized Britain; in wealthy and poor, industrialized and agrarian, Catholic and Protestant regions. Sophisticated statistical modelling proved that hypotheses constructed around causal links between indices of modernization and falls in fertility did not apply.²¹ While the overall results in various regions and nation-states may be similar, detailed studies increasingly showed that they were arrived at in quite dissimilar ways, embedded in different (though changing) “cultures of contraception” and infant care, which in turn tended to follow language and dialect boundaries established centuries earlier.²²

Findings such as these helped consolidate a “cultural turn” in studies of modern societies — and inspired my own curiosity regarding ethnicity and gender regimes. Demographers, too, chastened by an inability to confirm causal connections between more or less modern economies and births, have begun examining the efficacy of a number of cultural factors in demographic change.²³ For most, this reorientation was filtered through a particular notion of culture amenable to statistical treatment, and in particular heavy reliance on large-scale surveys of individual attitudes. The origins of this operationalization of “culture” might well be explained by the recent dominance of a statistical “political culture” approach in American universities. Whatever the case, such an approach is deeply problematic. As Steinmetz states:

First, it was committed to an essentially “behavioural” form of analysis in which the individual was the privileged unit of analysis, even if individual

20 M. Livi-Bacci, *A History of Italian Fertility During the Last Two Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 244.

21 G. Alter, “Theories of Fertility Decline: A Nonspecialists’s Guide to the Current Debate” in J. R. Gillis, L. A. Tilly, and D. Levine, eds., *The European Experience of Declining Fertility, 1850–1970* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 20–21.

22 Gillis *et al.*, eds., *The European Experience*, p. 5; Alter, “Theories of Fertility Decline”, p. 21.

23 See, for example, S. C. Watkins, “Demographic Nationalism in Western Europe, 1870–1960” in Gillis *et al.*, eds., *The European Experience*, pp. 270–289.

responses were subsequently aggregated for statistical processing. The individualist bias was at odds with the point made even by Parsons that culture is not (or not primarily) a property of individuals.... Another set of drawbacks derived from the interweaving of modernisation theory with the political culture approach.... The most serious shortcoming ... was its failure to unpack the dialectical relations between states and culture.²⁴

Statistical work does not inevitably involve the assumption that the same range of individual characteristics is unevenly distributed through different sub-populations; “society” can be conceptualized as an aggregation of relatively autonomous social groupings that do not necessarily share logics of social understanding and association. Indeed, in spite of differences in approach, demographers, economists, anthropologists, and historians all agree on the need to dis-aggregate demographic data so that different cultural and occupational groups, family types, and localities can be studied in more detail; on the value of combining qualitative and quantitative work; and on the benefits of interdisciplinary studies. “A good study on a single village”, one demographer famously noted, “could be worth a great deal; defective work on a nation could be dangerously misleading.”²⁵

All the same (and despite sophisticated contributions that defy this trend), the overwhelming impression one obtains from reading large numbers of contemporary demographic studies is that the “social” is constituted by sub-populations exhibiting different combinations and strengths of the same individual attributes. As the Princeton studies had done earlier, however, analyses of the second demographic transition in Mediterranean countries have contributed to challenging the theories initially used to explain it. A typical article by Bettio and Villa starts with a paradox: existing demographic theory predicts that women’s participation in the work force is inversely related to fertility; yet nations such as Britain, the United States, Denmark, and Sweden, where most women have jobs, have higher fertility rates than Italy, Spain, and Greece, where their participation in the work force is lower. The authors use a range of statistical indicators to reject the hypothesis that Mediterranean countries faced a “delay in entering demographic transition”, and instead posit what is in effect an alternative model of modernity, in which individuals achieve emancipation within, rather than outside, a family.²⁶

An influential form of this argument, advanced by Chesnais and Verstraete, revolves around the discrepancy between Italian women’s newly found taste for emancipation and individualism and a welfare state — as well as

24 Steinmetz, “Introduction”, pp. 19–20.

25 J. C. Caldwell, “Toward a Restatement of Demographic Transition Theory”, *Population and Development Review*, vol. 2, nos. 3–4 (1976), p. 358.

26 F. Bettio and P. Villa, “A Mediterranean Perspective on the Breakdown of the Relationship Between Participation and Fertility”, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1998), p. 155.

men's expectations — built around women's altruism and abundant supply of unpaid work. It is widely acknowledged that women's rates of education have risen dramatically over the last two decades, and girls now often stay in school longer than boys. The authors believe that this development helped erode previously accepted gender relations. The young women, they note, have learned to see themselves as autonomous individuals, and want to reap the financial and status benefits their investment in education warrants. Having children threatens to undermine this strategy of personal fulfilment.²⁷

Recent explanations of the demographic behaviour of Italians in Australia take up a similar range of theoretical points. Bracher and Santow use their extensive overview of published literature on Australia's southern Europeans to dispute the assumption that greater modernity leads to fewer children. While they note that family size cannot be taken as proxy for a uniform family structure, a comprehensive review of existing research has convinced them that there indeed is a distinctive southern-European family: "[T]hose aspects of Southern-European behaviour that are revealed by statistical analysis to differ from the host population are probably best viewed not in isolation from one another, but as manifestations of a distinctive and comprehensive view of the family." The composite picture they assemble from sources of varying quality epitomizes both the strong and the weak points of existing work on Italians and demography: it leads them to accept an unproblematic notion of a coherent ethnic culture steeped in tradition, but to contest the interpretation of its dynamics.

The authors note that family size, used by many demographers as a proxy for the level of modernity of particular social groups, can be the result of a strategy designed to maintain "traditional" values in a new environment. "Shifts in preference from large to small families ... are taken to result from a diminution of the value placed on the family and its functions, and to provide evidence of the ripeness of the population to fertility decline." In contrast, Bracher and Santow argue in a Malthusian fashion, "In some circumstances, the most negotiable aspect of a family may be its size; and that, however paradoxical this may appear, reducing the size of one's family may be the most effective way to ensure its survival." In particular:

To promote not just the survival but the advancement of [their ideal of a family], all members may be called upon to make sacrifices: all members will work hard; parents may forego additional children; children may forego the frivolous enjoyments of their non-southern-European school-mates. Many aspects of the actual family seem to be resistant to change; the relation between the sexes; the structure of authority within the family; its emphasis on marriage as the only acceptable form of adult life; its striving for economic

27 J.-C. Chesnais and C. Verstraete, "Le paradoxe féministe", *Le Débat* (September/October 1996), pp. 60–69; Chesnais, "Fertility, Family, and Social Policy".

security; its desire to conduct itself in private. But one aspect — the number of children — has proved amenable to change.²⁸

In all, trends routinely associated with modernity and women's emancipation might also be the product of quite different and very "traditional" domestic relations; those who put the greatest emphasis on the family might have fewer children than those whose allegiances are more "modern". Bracher and Santow conclude, "[I]f there is paradox in the fact that southern-European family size has declined in Australia in advance of change in traditional southern-European family values, then the paradox may be more evident to demographers than anyone else, and may be more evident than real."

The influential work of one of Australia's foremost demographers, Peter McDonald, combines notions of greater or lesser modernity of cultural forms with feminist analyses of welfare states. In the past three or four decades, McDonald argues, "different institutions in society have been moving away from the assumption of the male breadwinner model of the family in the direction of a gender equity model. They have done so, however, at differing speeds." Countries where the movement from patriarchy to equity is relatively even across all social institutions have higher fertility rates; in countries where some institutions move fast and others lag behind, fewer babies are born.

In Italy and Japan, for example, where women's opportunities in education and employment are close to those of men, but family relations remain patriarchal and few services cater to those who want to combine jobs and motherhood, many women will avoid marriage or childbearing altogether or will have only one child. In Scandinavian countries, in contrast, where the gap in gender equity between the public and private spheres is less, workplaces are more family-friendly, and expenditure on family services more adequate, birthrates are likely to be higher. Importantly, "average" women are most affected. Those who are rich can afford to buy whatever domestic help they need. Those who are already excluded from opportunities available in the labour market have nothing to lose, and a lot to gain, by having children and being able to participate in family life.

The gaps and dissonances *between* nations are replicated *within* countries with respect to more or less patriarchal familial cultures of different ethnic groups. "The institutional or organizational form of the family", McDonald argues, "constitutes an important part of a society's idealised morality"; as such, it is very resistant to change. Such idealized morality travels across space. Drawing on a number of commentaries on immigrant communities in Australia, McDonald notes that "Australians of Greek and Italian origin continue to adhere to conservative attitudes to the family and to the superiority of the adult male in family context"; their families are much more patriarchal

28 Santow and Bracher, "Traditional Families and Fertility Decline".

than those of Anglo-Australians. Indeed, the fertility rates of Italians and Greeks in Australia, which have followed the course of fertility in the home countries, “provide a particular example of the importance of family organization and idealized morality in the determination of fertility rates”.²⁹

Counting Italians in Australia

To establish the demographic characteristics of families which are the focus of these explanations, it is first necessary to define who exactly is an Italian in Australia and how her fertility is measured. When one of Australia’s foremost demographers attempted to clarify these issues using the 1986 census, he came up with three different estimates. In the most commonly used definition, 261,878 people, or 1.7 per cent of the Australian population, were born in Italy. According to this way of measuring, Slovene or German-speakers born inside Italian borders are Italian, but French-born Italian-speakers are French. A Sicilian-born woman who arrived in Australia at the age of six months is Italian, but her sister, born a year later, is Australian, as are both women’s children, even though both families speak Sicilian at home and regard themselves as natives of Ragusa. A much larger figure, 604,500 people, or 3.7 per cent of the population, represents the ethnic strength of Italians in Australia. To obtain this figure, Price counted as Italian only those people whose language, religion, and parents’ birthplace could also be considered Italian. He then allocated the Australian-born children of immigrants to one or more appropriate ethnic groups. Accordingly, children with two Italian parents were reckoned Italian; those with mixed parentage were allocated half to each ethnic background. Finally, 507,200 people, or 3.5 per cent of the population, identified themselves as fully Italian in terms of their “ancestry”. This question, asked for the first time in the 1986 census, was explained in the accompanying booklet in the following terms: “Ancestry means the ethnic or national group from which you are descended. It is quite acceptable to base your answer on your grandparents’ ancestry. Persons of mixed ancestry who do not identify with a single group should answer their multiple ancestry. Persons who consider their ancestry to be Australian may answer ‘Australia’.”³⁰ While people were asked to identify their ancestry, only identification with relatively large groups was acceptable: they could be Italian but not *Siciliani*, let alone *Ragusoni*.

An alternative definition of who is Italian might revolve around the use of the Italian language at home. Rando and Leoni note that, in Australia, Italian is the most widely spoken community language after English, with close to half a million speakers. For census and other statistical purposes, it is assumed that all speakers of “Italian” use the same language: the one taught in Italian language classes. In fact, most Italians speak varieties other than

29 McDonald, *Gender Equity*.

30 C. A. Price, *Ethnic Groups in Australia* (Canberra: Office of Multicultural Affairs, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1989).

the standard one and perhaps as many as 45 per cent use a dialect habitually or exclusively. At the same time, in communicating with each other, Italian Australians often use what can be termed Australian Italian, a variety of Popular Italian, defined as a social variety of Italian used by the lesser educated, mainly dialectophones who, guided by the model of Standard Italian, try to achieve a common linguistic denominator which might enable communication beyond the limits imposed upon them by their dialects. In addition, many second-generation Italians strongly identify themselves as Italian, even though they often use mainly English, even at home.³¹

Calculations of differential fertility rates depend not only on being able to distinguish “ethnic” from “Australian” mothers, but on the use of more or less complex statistical techniques. The simplest of these is to compare the numbers of babies born to Italian and Australian women. Using figures from the 1966 census, for example, Ware found that 26 per cent of Australian-born women but 37 per cent of Italian-born women aged 45 to 54 had four or more children; for those aged 55 and over, the corresponding figures were 25 and 44 per cent.³² In 1971 the crude birth rate for Italian-born women was 50 per cent higher than for the Australian-born: 32.30 compared to 20.12. Italian women, as everyone could see and statistics repeatedly confirmed, bred like rabbits.³³

The problem is that “Italians” were demographically different from “Australians”. Not least because of selective immigration policies, most were young adults, and the majority were male. For every five Italian women, there were six men. Rather than a pyramid, the age distribution of Italian immigrants resembled a spindle: almost a third of women born in Australia but only about one in ten women born in southern Europe were under 15 years of age.³⁴ Racism confronting Italians — and their own or relatives’ inability to speak English — strengthened whatever preference they might have had for marrying each other. As a result of these factors, most women of Italian origin in Australia were at once of child-bearing age and married. In the 15-to-49 age group, 65 per cent of Australian-born women but 85 per cent of Italian-born women were married.³⁵ When compared to the general population, Italian women indeed had a disproportionately high number of babies. In comparison to the fertility rate of married Australian women of

31 G. Rando and F. Leoni, “The Italian Language in Australia: Sociolinguistic Aspects” in C. Alcorso *et al.*, eds, *Australia's Italians: Culture and Community in a Changing Society* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992).

32 H. Ware, “Immigrant Fertility: Behaviour and Attitudes”, *International Migration Review*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1975), p. 363.

33 In a popular 1950s novel *They're a Weird Mob*, an improbable “dago” family had an imaginary house built with a chute for babies leading to the basement.

34 E. Yusuf and G. Eckstein, “Fertility of Migrant Women in Australia”, *Journal of Biosocial Science*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1980), pp. 182–183.

35 E. Yusuf and I. Rockett, “Immigrant Fertility: Patterns and Differentials in Australia, 1971–76”, *Population Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3 (1981), pp. 415–416.

childbearing age, however, this differential was reduced. When they were compared to women of similar income and education, the difference disappeared altogether.

Measurements of *completed fertility* produced unanticipated results as well. In his analysis of the 1971 Australian census, Day concluded that married Italian women born between 1907 and 1911 had substantially more children over their lifetimes than the Australian-born, but that among the 1927–1931 cohort, the opposite was the case: Italian-born women had between two-thirds and three-quarters of the number of children of their Australian-born counterparts. The contrast was even greater if the same cohort of Italian women was compared to Australian-born Catholics. One in five Australian-born Catholic women who married before age 26 had six or more children, but fewer than one in twelve Italians did so.³⁶ Similarly, Young notes that Italian women born between 1927 and 1936 had somewhat lower completed fertility than the Australian-born.³⁷

Total fertility rate (TFR) is calculated by adding all age-specific fertility rates for a given year. This widely used measure can account for women who have not yet completed childbearing, but can hide a range of contrary trends affecting different cohorts. These trends can be disaggregated using complex statistical techniques, but are largely inaccessible to those without specialist technical skills. In Australia, average Italian TFR was 3.38 in 1971 and declined to 2.44 in 1976; Italian marital TFR fell from 5.67 to 4.2, and Italian non-marital TFR from 0.76 to 0.41. A more elaborate procedure, called the “own child method”, is used when data on the number of children ever born are not available. When one uses this technique, which estimates birthrates from the number of young children who can be matched with their mothers in the same dwelling on census day, the TFR of the first generation of Italians was recently estimated to be 1.6 and that of the second generation 1.7.³⁸

The problem remains that fertility rates for distinct social groups should compare like with like. Using multiple regression analysis to match groups of women on a range of indicators such as income, education, occupation, or urban and rural residence to explain the higher than average fertility rates of southern European women recorded in the 1966 census, Ware concluded that

the most significant explanation of the gap between the southern-European-born immigrants and the native-born population is ... through differences in socio-economic status. The behaviour of the scantily-educated, unskilled, poor, southern European immigrants is not so very different from that of

36 L. H. Day, “Minority-group Status and Fertility: A More Detailed Test of the Hypothesis”, *Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 25 (Autumn 1984), pp. 456–472.

37 C. M. Young, “Changes in the Demographic Behaviour of Migrants in Australia and the Transition Between Generations”, *Population Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1 (1991), pp. 67–89.

38 M. J. Abbasi-Shavazi and P. McDonald, “Fertility and Multiculturalism: Immigrant Fertility in Australia, 1977–1991”, *The International Migration Review*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2000), p. 230.

native-born wives who are similarly underprivileged. The contrast lies in the fact that there are very few native-born wives who are similarly underprivileged, and for that reason immigrant behaviour appears to be distinctive.³⁹

In his statistical analysis of the 1991 census, when southern Europeans appeared to have lower fertility but remained underprivileged, Abbasi-Shavazi similarly concluded that “birthplace, except for Lebanon, was not significantly related to fertility when other variables were taken into account. This suggests that, all else being equal, most birthplace groups would have *similar* fertility to Australian women.” However, when he combined data for Italians and Greeks to create a variable indicating southern European birthplace, a multiple regression model suggested a different result: “on average, about 37.6 per cent of such women would have a child under three, 12.1 per cent *lower* than Australia-born women.”⁴⁰

There is wide agreement that Southern Europeans in general and people of Italian origin in particular have distinct demographic patterns, which today include a lower fertility rate. Analyses of the 1986 survey of the Australian Family Project, for example, repeatedly found that, in many respects, the behaviour of Australia’s Southern Europeans and their daughters remained clearly distinct from that of other Australians. In particular, cohabitation is rare, and their marriage rates are higher and marriages more stable than those of other immigrants or the native-born.⁴¹ However, there is less agreement on when the trend to lower fertility commenced, whether it is limited to women who spent a substantial part of their lives in Italy, and whether “ethnic” or “cultural” differences in fertility rates would disappear with more sophisticated statistical measurement. Counting Italians also depends on whether people identify themselves as Italian, and this in turn is related to a host of ongoing cultural practices productive of distinctive cultural identity. Leaving aside the problem of whether women of Italian origin do indeed have higher or lower fertility rates than other Australians, explanations of why they are different tend to revolve around the themes of modernity, tradition, and cultural maintenance. In all, the same cultural processes help constitute what is to be explained and are drawn upon in explanations of its dynamics.

Italian Families, Tradition, and Modernity

Europe ends at Naples and ends badly. Calabria, Sicily and all the rest belong to Africa. [Creuzé de Lesser, 1806]⁴²

39 Ware, “Immigrant Fertility: Behaviour and Attitudes”, p. 376.

40 M. J. Abbasi-Shavazi, “Fertility Patterns of Selected Australian Immigrant Groups, 1977–1991” (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1998), pp. 213, 216.

41 Santow and Bracher, “Traditional Families and Fertility Decline”, p. 71.

42 Quoted in G. Gribaudi, “Images of the South: The *Mezzogiorno* as Seen by Outsiders and Insiders” in R. Lumley and J. Morris, eds., *The New History of the Italian South: The Mezzogiorno Revisited* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), p. 87.

Sardinia, Sicily and the Mezzogiorno are three peoples who are still primitive, not completely evolved, less civilised and refined than the populations of the North and Centre of Italy. [Alfredo Niceforo, *L'Italia barbara contemporanea*, 1898]⁴³

This remarkable and rapid decrease in fertility [in Italy] ... is the result of deep transformation in the values and behaviours that have touched the family nucleus after centuries of tradition ... [the] process of transformation from a single model of the household towards a plurality of family types is still in motion.⁴⁴

Virtually all our family occasions, from the daily dinner to the annual holidays, and including the great life-cycle events like christenings, weddings and funerals, are the product of the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵

In popular imagination, we all share an imaginary patriarchal past of extended families, strong fathers, full-time housewives, plentiful and respectful children, picturesque cottages, and delicious family meals. In the west this image belongs to the time of our great-grandparents and grandparents; in less developed regions, it is still alive. Whatever its historical accuracy, this picture plays a significant role in assessing the present and imagining the future. For modernization theorists and many demographers, conservative patriarchal families of the past and of less modern cultures have begun to give way to gender egalitarian ones. Drawing on a range of writings within (broadly defined) social history, I depict a different version of the past. Rather than greater or lesser modernity, the picture contains a number of complex and interdependent family forms. Rather than indicating an autonomous process of modernization, it draws attention to mutual dependencies of diverse economic regions, the role of state agencies, and political mobilizations. Finally, the very notions of tradition and modernity are depicted as important stakes in a highly contested process of constructing collective identities.

In early studies of historical demography, it was common to group European families into two categories: those in northwestern Europe, characterized by late marriage for both men and women, neo-local nuclear households, and high levels of permanent celibacy; and those in southern Europe and Asia, characterized by young ages at marriage, particularly for women, complex households, and negligible celibacy rates. Recent historical work paints

43 Quoted in J. Dickie, "Stereotypes of the Italian South" in Lumley and Morris, eds., *The New History of the Italian South*, p. 115.

44 S. S. D'Andrea, "Italian Quality of Life", *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 44, no. 1 (1998), pp. 23, 25.

45 J. Gillis, "Making Time for Family: The Invention of Family Time(s) and the Reinvention of Family History", *Journal of Family History*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1996), p. 8, and *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual and Quest for Family Values* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

a more complex picture, both in the north and in the south. Levine and Secombe, for example, are among those who argue, in opposition to the Cambridge school of historical demography, that the same nominal composition of households in northwestern Europe between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries does not imply one unchanging family form. Thus peasant, proto-industrial, proletarian, and male breadwinner households might contain identical numbers of adults and children, but share little else.⁴⁶ Similarly, Maynes, Taylor, and Kriedte demonstrate that the same number of children can be produced by a “regime of conservation” (where fewer babies are born to mothers at greater intervals but a large proportion survive) or a “regime of wastefulness” (with many births and high mortality).⁴⁷ Szreter argues not only that there were many different “demographic transitions” in England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but that the same fertility rate can result from quite different regimes of contraception (such as sexual sophistication in France and fumbling abstinence in England). Importantly, Szreter makes an explicit and comprehensive case against the almost universal assumption that socio-economic status is smoothly linked to fertility. While most demographers and lay commentators assume that, the lower a couple’s status, the more children they are likely to have (because of a number of factors that can be roughly summarized as lesser modernity), Szreter argues that some groups of unskilled workers in England pioneered small families, while a few of the most privileged continued to have large numbers of children. Prior assumptions about greater or lesser “civility”, he argues, produced erroneous statistical analyses.⁴⁸

A parallel argument can be made with regard to the region now called Italy. Barbagli, for example, concludes that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were three dominant patterns of family formation, which in addition changed over time, above all in response to new economic conditions.⁴⁹ The first pattern combined patrilocal residence after marriage with late marriage and predominated mainly in the rural regions of northern and

46 See, for example, D. Levine, *Reproducing Families: The Political Economy of English Population History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); W. Secombe, *A Millennium of Family Change: Feudalism to Capitalism in Northwestern Europe* (London: Verso, 1992).

47 M. J. Maynes and T. Taylor, “Germany” in J. M. Hawes and N. R. Hiner, *Children in Historical and Comparative Perspective: An International Handbook* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); P. Kriedte, H. Medick, and J. Schlumbohm, “Proto-industrialisation Revisited: Demography, Social Structure, and Modern Domestic Industry”, *Continuity and Change*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1993), pp. 223, 225.

48 S. Szreter, *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain, 1860–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and *Falling Fertilities and Changing Sexualities in Europe Since c1850: A Comparative Survey of National Demographic Patterns* (Canberra: Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, 1996).

49 M. Barbagli, “Marriage and the Family in the Early Nineteenth Century” in J. A. Davis and P. Ginsborg, eds., *Society and Politics in the Age of the Risorgimento* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 92–127.

central Italy. Here, most of the population lived in multiple households. Those with the most land tended to have the largest and most complex households; among the poorer peasants and share croppers in particular, many of the younger sons and daughters never married. The second model consisted of simple conjugal households and early marriage (for women at least, but often also for men), and this was typical in the south; in a number of localities, the proportion of complex households was among the lowest in Europe. Here, young couples from more prosperous families set up their own households with provisions from both sets of parents; those from poorer circumstances began their married life in debt. This pattern is significant because it cuts across both earlier demographic theory (which held that early marriage in rural societies goes with complex, multi-generational households), and historical "common sense" which associates "tradition" and early marriage for women with patriarchal extended families.

The third model consisted of single-family households and late marriage for both men and women, and this was common throughout the cities of northern and central Italy, as well as in Sardinia. In urban Italy, both neo-local residence after marriage and the simple conjugal household had been widespread since the fourteenth century, except among the elites, who lived in patrilocal households and spent the greater part of their lives in either extended or multiple households. By the end of the eighteenth century, they too began to adopt neo-local residence and simple conjugal households after marriage. In Sardinia, where the pattern of landholding resembled that of Sicily but the age at marriage for both women and men was among the highest in Italy, it is likely that distinct customs of inheritance and marital property played a part. In theory, at least, sons and daughters inherited equally, and marriage partners held property in common; here, both women and men worked to accumulate sufficient funds before they married.

Barbagli relates the difference in marriage patterns between peasants in northern and central Italy and the south to the predominant patterns of land tenure. In the north and centre, agriculture was organized around peasant farmsteads scattered thinly around the countryside and surrounded by the fields they worked; this pattern encouraged the formation of complex households. In the south, in contrast, the preponderance of large estates and extensive farming, as well as the dispersal and fragmentation of peasant land, were common. Here, the farm labourers and peasants tended to live not on the land they worked but in larger and often distant settlements. This pattern of settlement in turn encouraged the formation of single conjugal households.⁵⁰ Ironically, an influential anthropological study of one such isolated southern village, characterized by inward-looking nuclear households and a lack of civic consciousness ascribed in part to the absence of extended fam-

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

ily forms, has entered the public imagination as proof of the anti-modern tendencies of traditional extended families.⁵¹

The significance of this emphasis on historical diversity is accentuated if family forms within one region are further disaggregated. In sophisticated work on the first demographic transition in Sicily, Jane and Peter Schneider provide a model of such work. The authors looked at the impact of major transformations in political economy on different family forms. They concluded that not only the timing, but the logics and dynamics, of demographic transition were considerably different among landless peasants, those with viable farms, artisans, and the gentry — not least because different social groups were characterized by considerably different forms of gender relations.⁵² Their focus on the landless peasants, whose lives are most often described in terms of “tradition”, is not accidental — it is here that the theoretical premises of demographic accounts are most exposed to alternative forms of interpretation.

In Italy, as in other western societies, until the late nineteenth century population and resources expanded together: the rich almost invariably had larger families than their poorer neighbours. The wealthy tended to marry younger, were less affected by sterility and still-births caused by hunger and disease, and had more resources to bring children into adulthood. In the late nineteenth century, this relationship was reversed. In Sicily, too, while the gentry and artisans began having fewer children, the landless peasants, in spite of falling mortality, began to have more. Men of the gentry, who pioneered the demographic transition in Sicily, were motivated among other things by declining incomes from land. Yet their behaviour displayed little of the self-restraint usually associated with modernity. Men who valued immoderate indulgence and predatory sexuality did not resort to Malthusian abstinence, but sexually exploited servant and peasant women. Their wives were legendary for overlooking such sexual excesses, suffering long years of abstinence, with occasional abortions in Palermo. The economic and other drawbacks of large families, in other words, were taken into account by men who did not abandon “traditional” lack of self-restraint and resulted in fewer children by women who could hardly be described as liberated.

Fertility transition among the Sicilian artisan class occurred between the First and Second World Wars — a period during which the new association

51 Gribaudi, “Images of the South”, pp. 106–108. The anthropological study is Edward Banfield’s 1958 work on “amoral familism”, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*.

52 J. Schneider and P. Schneider, “Going Forward in Reverse Gear: Culture, Economy and Political Economy in the Demographic Transitions of a Rural Sicilian Town” in Gillis *et al.*, eds., *The European Experience*. This conclusion contrasts with the more influential view of Livi-Bacci and Bresci, who argue that, in the south, there was “low differential fertility among social categories and between city and the country; cultural rather than socioeconomic factors apparently exercised a pronounced transversal control in demographic behaviour”. M. Livi Bacci and M. Breschi, “Italian Fertility: An Historical Account”, *Journal of Family History*, vol. 15, no. 4 (1990), p. 404.

between large families and poverty became increasingly visible and acknowledged. Until the 1920s, artisans had between five and thirteen living children; after 1930, the great majority had two or at most three. According to the Schneiders, reasons for limiting fertility included considerations such as cessation of economically beneficial out-migration and more expensive apprenticeships. In contrast to other social groups, fertility limitation was played out within companionate marriages, built around the crucial and visible contribution by wives to craft shop and workshop. Even the all-male leisure pursuits of the artisans, the authors note, were more compatible with partnership with women than those of the gentry or peasants. According to oral histories, artisan men saw *coitus interruptus* as a fine and complex learned skill: “Most artisan men ... interviewed characterised their birth-control efforts as requiring a high degree of communication and cooperation between the spouses — a characterisation seconded by the women.”

Among the landless peasants, the *bracciante*, the dynamic of family limitation was different again. The Schneiders note that reminiscences as well as scholarly explanations tend to be built around concepts such as tradition, instincts, and religious fatalism. The system of patriarchal honour and shame, with women’s tolerance of a degree of promiscuity in sons and husbands, coupled with obscene and sacrilegious joking in all-male groups, strict policing of women’s chastity, and their ostensible subordination to male authority, is also an important part of the accepted explanation. In this system, there were much stronger emotional bonds between mothers and children and their own parents than with husbands. The Schneiders do not reject all aspects of this explanation, but argue that the picture was more complex. The alternative they paint is directly relevant to my argument regarding the relatively recent origin of much of the “tradition” that forms the currency of explanations of “Italian culture”, whether in Italy itself or in emigrant destinations such as Australia.

In their work, the authors depict the desperate poverty of *bracciante* and the many humiliations to which it led: overcrowded hovels where accepted rules of chastity and respect could not be observed, chronic hunger and sickness, women’s inability to care for babies themselves because they had to work away from home (at times as wet nurses for the rich), their lack of an education in Italian and hence the necessity to find others to mediate when they dealt with government officials, their dependence on gentry handouts and at times begging to survive. Most parents were too poor to provide housing for newlyweds; the majority of people married with debts and initially lived in rented housing. The greatest humiliations, however, grew out of the dispersal of the family as a working group.

Bracciante men relied on badly paid seasonal wage labour. Their life consisted of days of intense physical exertion and days of sitting around with other men in local taverns. Most adult women had to work away from home, often because men’s employment was conditional on supplying their wives and daughters as servants. Children, too, had to work: boys at seven or eight

alongside a father or grandfather and later as shepherds for landowners; girls by the age of nine cooking, looking after infants, and cleaning for their own families and later working as servants. Since such work was necessary to accumulate funds for a wedding, it was difficult to quit to escape sexual abuse by employers or their sons. In any case, even if she did avoid assault, the common perception was that a woman could not maintain honour and purity while she worked as a servant. In this context, the machismo of *bracciante* men was tempered by the fact that their wives served not them, but the upper class, who might have taken liberties that the husbands and fathers were impotent to prevent. The men felt shame tinged with rage that they could not effectively retain their wives and daughters at home, or even provide separate sleeping places for their male and female children. "In effect, servile relations drained energy from one group of families to add it to another," and the poor knew it and resented it. "The result was an interdependent demography between the two classes: *bracciante* milk nurtured gentry infants and *bracciante* mothers cared for them and, as gentry couples reduced their fertility, the *braccianti* increased theirs."

This double characteristic of dispersal and service distinguished landless peasants from the minority of landed peasants, the *burgisi*. The *burgisi*, whose families seem to provide a model for the collective remembering of a patriarchal past in Italian history, also had many children, but unlike the *bracciante* remembered their early lives with affection. Many reminisced fondly and nostalgically about large families and typically spoke of their kin as interdependent and pulling together. Having land and livestock, a *burgisi* father mobilized his children's labour to maintain and enhance the family patrimony, putting his sons to work for him or claiming their earnings if they worked for others. A common fund served to provide trousseaux for girls and sons' marriage settlements; in hard times, children delayed marriage until their thirties.

The *bracciante*, in contrast, remembered hunger, overworked mothers, colds, illness — and the support of their mothers and mothers-in-law when they themselves began to make a serious effort to limit their families in the 1950s and 1960s. This last demographic transition took place in the context of increased opportunities, rather than, as in the past, cycles of crisis. Family limitation enabled men to claim the respectability and authority over their households that they had previously lacked. For their part, *bracciante* women were not forced back to the home; recollections of both men and women give the impression that labourers' wives organized a strike under the slogan *ognuno per i nostri mariti* (every woman for her own husband). The woman, formerly forced to disperse her energies, could now retire to the home to devote her labour and attention to her own husband and children, rather than clean, provide food, and care for the families and property of others. The Schneiders note, "Sicilian *bracciante* gave a straightforward answer to the question of why they now practice contraception: it is the only way to have a decent life. Before their struggle and the land reform, no better life seemed possible." Like artisans, both *bracciante* men and women

began to talk about *coitus interruptus* as a valuable and finely honed skill (and one much easier to practise now that the parents had a separate bedroom). They also began to associate it with two Malthusian virtues: sacrifice (*fare sacrifici*) and striving for social betterment and respectability, and its converse, contempt for the sexuality of those whose multiple offspring proved them less self-controlled. Unlike the artisans, however, the *bracciante* did not plan in advance how many children they wanted. Rather, they had additional children as circumstances permitted, sometimes with a gap of ten years or more.

The Schneiders conclude that no single model of “traditional culture” will explain the fact that southern Italy underwent its demographic transition later than the north, or that landless peasants were the last to be affected. While “western values” have indeed spread to twentieth-century Sicily, they are a correlate to and consequence of fertility decline, not its cause. Rather than breaking with tradition, Sicilian peasants organized the transition to smaller families to realize previously unattainable values of dignity and respectability as defined by their culture. They did so in the context of state-sponsored land reform, initiated in response to widespread rural radicalism.

Work such as this gains even greater significance if it is set against writings on notions of the Italian past. A recent overview history of Italy, for example, draws on work which suggests that the *Risorgimento*, and the myth of an Italian “national character” and the family life that nurtured it, was built on an idealization of life in the countryside — the myth of the Italian peasant developed by Vincenzo Cuoco and his praise of the system of “patriarchal cultivation”.⁵³ The code of honour itself, so frequently used in accounts of Mediterranean families and societies by anthropologists, has been described as an “invented tradition”, a strategy through which vulnerable sectors of southern Italian society defended themselves against peripheralization.⁵⁴ Indeed, while outsiders tend to attribute “Italian traditions” to all Italians, for the last century and a half those writing on Italy itself were more likely to contrast the traditionalism of the south with the dynamism and modernity of the north.

One recent collection of essays illustrates these issues. While they start from a number of disciplines and approaches, the authors have in common an emphasis on the specificity and diversity of southern history and society and the internal rationality of social processes that have often been analysed in terms of adherence to timeless tradition, or else through some inherent deficit of the southern character.⁵⁵ A significant part of the project is an attempt to chart the making of *merridionalismo*: constructions of the south

53 C. Dugan, *A Concise History of Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); G. Bollati, *L'Italiano: Il Carattere Nazionale Come Storia e Come Invenzione* (Torino: G. Einaudi, 1983), p. 101.

54 J. Schneider and P. Schneider, *Culture and Political Economy in Western Sicily* (New York: Academic Press, 1976).

55 J. Morris, “Challenging *Merridionalismo*: Constructing a New History for Southern Italy” in Lumley and Morris, eds., *The New History of the Italian South*, pp. 1–19.

as a “southern problem” which needed to be resolved if the newly created Italian nation, modelled on the best civic traditions of the centre-north, was to achieve true greatness.

Italian Women and Work

In our country, women work far more than men do. In manual industries 1 379 905 men are employed, compared to 1 692 740 women; in other words for every hundred male artisans there are 123 females. [Enrico Fano, 1868, commenting on the 1861 Italian census]⁵⁶

In Italy it was different. There the women didn't work, they all stayed in their houses and first their fathers worked and then their husbands. Here it's all different, the women must work too. This is the main difference.⁵⁷

A central part of the imagined tradition of Italian patriarchal past is the almost universal absence of married women from the work force. When interviewed in Australia, most Italian immigrants stressed that back home their mothers, older sisters, and grandmothers gave up paid work after they married. Most commentaries on Italian immigrants in Australia similarly note that the necessity that women work for pay in a modern industrial economy was one of the most difficult transitions that people from “traditional” rural communities had to make. Here, I paint a more complex picture.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a number of historians suggest, Italy resembled other European countries: among the poor, all members of the family needed to contribute to remunerative work; only the better-off could afford to have mother work just in the home or even to send children regularly to school. In her work on northern and central Italy, for example, Cammarosano shows not only that women from the labouring classes worked throughout their lives in a mixture of remunerative and domestic tasks, but also that early capitalist industry was a predominantly female and child endeavour. At the same time, employment in only one occupation throughout the year was the exception rather than the rule, for women as well as men.

Most labouring families shared the necessity to assemble a living from a patchwork of subsistence activities, even though regional and individual patterns varied widely. Children would be sent to service; women, children, and old people would work the small piece of land and make use of the gleaning rights allocated to men alongside the cash payment men received for their own work. In mountainous regions, men would migrate every year in search of seasonal work, only to return for the harvest, while women and children worked in domestic industry and subsistence agriculture. Some male family

⁵⁶ Quoted in Barbagli, “Marriage and the Family”, pp. 156–157.

⁵⁷ D. B. Kasnitz, *Work, Gender and Health Among Southern Italian Immigrants in Melbourne, Australia* (London: University of London, Microfilms International, 1981), p. 13.

members would venture further afield, working in road gangs in Germany, building sites in America, coffee plantations in Brazil, cane fields in Australia. To make a living, families would combine income and produce from tenant farming and homesteading, from kitchen gardens and domestic animals, from a variety of domestic industries, both for use and for sale, with what they earned as petty traders, as well as from waged work in the fields and on the roads, in quarries and on the railroads, in workshops and factories, in mining and construction or the navy, in military and domestic service, and from scavenging and petty theft. When statisticians in the newly unified Italy attempted to gain a picture of what people did for a living, they classified a substantial proportion of the working population, male as well as female, as being in “unspecified employment”.

How can such evidence be reconciled with the almost universal memories of women all staying in their houses? First, there is a widespread tendency, among statisticians and ordinary people alike, to under-report women’s remunerative activity. Today, work is overwhelmingly understood as a formal paid job. Such understanding has a history, which combines employment, taxation, and administrative practices with notions of individual and collective respectability. In Australia as well as Italy, for example, many women’s diffuse economic activities ceased to be reckoned as work by census enumerators in late nineteenth century, partly as a result of concerns with new notions of national reputation. In the Italian census of 1881, the definition of female worker was restricted to women who stuck to one occupation and did not intersperse their remunerative activities with other duties. Partly as a result, the category “housewife” leaped from just under 400,000 to nearly ten times that number a decade later.⁵⁸ Such “constitutive” changes are significant in both gender and comparative terms: in many regions and social groups, they have made it difficult to map out the activities of a significant proportion of the “irregularly employed” male work force as well.⁵⁹

Today, statistical measures of work force participation consistently indicate that a smaller proportion of married women in Italy “work” compared to their counterparts in countries with more adequate provision of social services. Sunstrom, for example, shows that, among married women with children under ten years of age, 80 per cent of those in Sweden worked compared to 41 per cent in Italy. In Sweden 38 per cent of the working mothers were employed part-time compared to 12 per cent in Italy.⁶⁰ However, a

58 S. O. Cammarosano, “Labouring Women in Northern and Central Italy in the Nineteenth Century” in Davis and Ginsborg, eds., *Society and Politics*, p. 158. For Australia, see D. Deacon, “Political Arithmetic: The Nineteenth-century Australian Census and the Construction of the Dependant Woman”, *Signs*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1985), pp. 27–47. See also N. Folbre, “The Unproductive Housewife: Her Evolution in Nineteenth-century Economic Thought”, *Signs*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1991), pp. 463–484.

59 See, for example, D. R. Holmes, *Cultural Disenchantments: Worker Peasantries in Northeast Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 207.

60 E. Sunstrom, “Should Mothers Work? Age and Attitudes in Germany, Italy and Sweden”, *International Journal of Social Welfare*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1999), p. 195.

number of scholars point out that statistical measures of women's participation in the work force in Italy are deeply problematic. This is above all because work still tends to be conceptualized as full-time, legal, life-long, paid work, mainly done by men, for a family wage, for big employers in industry or services. Women (and immigrants), in contrast, tend to be disproportionately involved in "atypical work" and in "informal" and "black" sectors of the economy, which in turn form a disproportionate share of the Italian economy. Stratigaki and Vaiou, for example, note that in 1989 women in Southern Europe comprised 80 to 90 per cent of the estimated 1.5 million home workers.⁶¹

The second reason for the widespread memories of women who did not work relates to a historically unique period in Italian (and indeed western) history: a short-lived "era of housewives" after the Second World War when the male breadwinner family gained hegemony. Saraceno notes that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, women as well as children in most large towns of the Italian centre-north had a high rate of participation in the labour force. For both newly migrated and longstanding urban women, working for pay was part of the traditional family economy. According to Saraceno,

in working-class families at the beginning of the century the new culture of the intimate family and motherhood, as well as of the rights of children, was not widespread. However, changes in legislation concerning child and female labour, and the access to some schooling for children, started to change the traditional framework of gender and generational relations as well: putting very young children to work became less usual and legitimate, and the women's role as homemaker became crucial for family well-being and respectability in addition to her capacity to earn money, if necessary.

By the mid-1930s, an age-related pattern of women's participation in the work force became more firmly established, with the bulk of women leaving work on marriage, but a minority remaining in paid work.⁶²

Only between the 1940s and 1960s, however, did a growing proportion of married women accede to — or were driven to — the role of full-time housewife that had previously been common in the urban lower and upper middle class. Even then, during decades when a maximum number of adult women devoted themselves to full-time homemaking, "in bourgeois families and in many middle-class families of the 1950s the heavier domestic tasks were performed by servants. The daughters and sometimes the wives of the more modest classes, especially rural classes, were handed over by their

61 M. Stratigaki and D. Vaiou, "Women's Work and Informal Activities in Southern Europe", *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 26 (1994), p. 1229.

62 C. Saraceno, "Constructing Families, Shaping Women's Lives: The Making of Italian Families Between Market Economy and State Interventions" in Gillis *et al.*, eds., *The European Experience*, p. 256.

families to the more affluent to guarantee the physical work required for a comfortable domestic life.” Saraceno concludes that the “figure of the adult married woman as a full-time homemaker, only recently emerged, was short-lived in society and the family — although it lives on tenaciously in the collective imagination”.⁶³

For many working people, mothers’ ability to work only in the home signified far more than imitation of middle-class ideals. Goddard, writing on Naples, argues for example:

The attributes of motherhood ... represent the integrity of the group — whether this be the family or the community — against the negative effects of systems which operate according to different moralities. Both capitalism and the state are seen to be based on principles deprived of personal content, where personal considerations are irrelevant. Here, calculation and gain overrule reciprocity and self-sacrifice. Profit is seen as the aim of capitalist production, and this is seen as being accomplished through exploitation, through patterns of work which are disadvantageous to the weaker parties.... Women, on the other hand, when located in the context of the family, stand for self-negation and generosity. Women and kin stand for the positive identity of the poor of the city and for an opposition to the amorality of work and the state.⁶⁴

In addition, since waged work evidently involves exploitation, it is logically likely to (and often does) involve sexual exploitation as well.

Italian immigration to Australia peaked in the 1950s and 1960s, a period when most married women indeed were full-time homemakers and wives’ employment, in both countries, was associated with lack of respectability. Nevertheless, the remembered tradition of women working only in the home in Italy contrasts with common precepts about the necessity for emigrant mothers to get jobs. “Although most working-class southern Italians would agree that ideally the husband should be the sole breadwinner,” one scholar notes, “they recognise that this is an Australian impossibility.”⁶⁵ Only where Italian men had greater opportunities to enter skilled work and establish small businesses, such as in Latin America, were male breadwinner families more numerous.⁶⁶

In both Italy and Australia, the era of housewives has passed. Indeed, the dynamic of its demise is believed to be a key motive force behind falling fertility rates. As Saraceno put it with regard to Italy, “[R]egardless of their own choices, mothers give their daughters messages that say paid work for

63 C. Saraceno, “The Italian Family: Paradoxes of Privacy” in A. Prost and G. Vincent, eds, *A History of Private Life: Vol. v, Riddles of Identity in Modern Times* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1991).

64 V. A. Goddard, *Gender, Family, and Work in Naples* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), pp. 224–225.

65 Kasnitz, *Work, Gender and Health*, pp. 206–207, 260–261.

66 D. Gabaccia, “Is Everywhere Nowhere? Nomads, Nations, and the Immigrant Paradigm of United States History”, *Journal of American History*, vol. 86, no. 3 (1999), pp. 1130–1131.

women, even if they are married, is valuable — for reasons of personal autonomy, as ‘family insurance’ in a time of insecure employment, or as ‘personal insurance’ against the hazards of marriage relationships.’⁶⁷ A recent multinational survey of attitudes towards a “traditional” gender division of labour showed that even the oldest group of men and women in Italy were more “progressive” than their counterparts in Germany. Young Italian women were the most radical of all age and country groups, including Swedish women.⁶⁸

Short-lived as it was, the “era of housewives” left a lasting legacy to western societies: welfare states and civil societies structured around women’s unpaid work. In post-war Italy, the very organization of existing services — scarcity of preschool child care, short school days, lack of services for the elderly and the handicapped, shop opening hours, hospital services — all required careful family organization based on the mother’s full-time presence. Such general trends were accentuated or alleviated by regional factors. For example, in spite of higher fertility levels, there were no day care centres in Sicily until the early 1980s, and many fewer services for children and older people, than in the centre-north. During a period of change in the 1970s, a number of caring needs, particularly for children, were at least partially redefined as individual social rights; with the financial stringency of the 1990s, “the increasing recourse to family-based means testing has tended to weaken individual rights in favour of family rights and (compulsory) family solidarity, particularly with regard to health care”.⁶⁹

Such complex links between states, families, and economies are not confined to the “modern” period. Many social historians routinely point out that, in western societies, increasing state intervention in the family since the nineteenth century went hand in hand with ever-more insistent characterization of the home as a private space. In her extensive work on gender and social policy, Saraceno not only repeatedly refers to such contradictory processes, but argues that the scale and explicit and pervasive nature of this intervention may be unique to Italy, at least in the period from the 1870s to the Second World War.⁷⁰ The Italian state, she suggests, helped reconstruct family forms through a number of unusually effective interventions for a century before what is often seen as the emergence of a “modern” welfare system.

67 C. Saraceno, “Changes in Life-course Patterns and Behavior of Three Cohorts of Italian Women”, *Signs*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1991), p. 512.

68 Sunstrom, “Should Mothers Work?”, p. 202.

69 Saraceno, “The Italian Family: Paradoxes of Privacy”, pp. 463–464, 499. In an influential early theorization of such work, Balbo spoke of women making a satisfying patchwork quilt out of otherwise unusable fragments of services and resources. L. Balbo, “Crazy Quilts: Rethinking the Welfare State Debate from a Woman’s Point of View” in A. S. Sassoon, ed., *Women and the State* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), pp. 45–71. Since all western countries experienced similar emphasis on male breadwinner families, however, the “era of housewives” alone cannot account for the particular familism of Mediterranean welfare states.

70 Saraceno, “The Italian Family: Paradoxes of Privacy”, pp. 495, 497.

Examining the same process from a different angle, other scholars argue that, while it is routinely assumed that the family loses productive functions to the market or state with increasing industrialization and the spread of capitalist relations, in some regions the opposite occurs. In Italy, both economic and political forces at times fostered familial involvement in capitalist production.⁷¹ For my purposes, such arguments are particularly significant, suggesting as they do that state policy helps constitute both the (theoretically posited) cultural autonomy of the family and a significant part of what is remembered as the Italian family tradition.

Italy in the World Economy

[M]odernisation has been very rapid in both Italy and Spain. In Italy, it took place later than in other European countries, between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s.⁷²

Modernization theory, critics note, erroneously tends to conceptualize historical change as a succession of uniform stages which countries undergo independently. In this process, modernity is equated with industrialization and urbanization (rather than factors such as dominance of wage labour and production for profit). In disputing the assumption that modernity is industrial and tradition rural, historians point to processes ranging from proto-industrialization in the countryside, capitalist farming, and rural proletarianization to the interdependence of unevenly developed regions, regional and international flows of workers, and historical reversals such as de-industrialization.

Whether or not they subscribe to modernization theory, commentaries on Italians in Australia frequently contain parallel assumptions regarding industrialization, urbanization, and modernity. Gucciardo with Bertelli, for example, noted that in the 1950s and 1960s most Italian immigrants to Australia came from peasant rural communities (such as Sicily and Calabria in the south and Veneto and Friuli in the north) which had not yet been touched by the growth of industrialization.⁷³ Similarly, in the introduction of an overview volume on “ethnic family values” in Australia, Storer argued that, in spite of many complexities, there were some common factors affecting immigrants coming to Australia between 1947 and 1967: they tended to come from “traditional rural-based economies with high emphasis on traditional social structures”. However, “as communication, technology and trade developed in the 1960s, and these countries were drawn into closer contact

71 Goddard, *Gender, Family, and Work in Naples*, pp. 12–13.

72 J. Guerrero and M. Naldini, “Is the South so Different? Italian and Spanish Families in Comparative Perspective” in M. Rhodes, ed., *Southern European Welfare States: Between Crisis and Reform* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), pp. 44–46.

73 T. Gucciardo with L. Bertelli, “The Best of Both Worlds: A Study of Second Generation Italo-Australian” (CIRC paper no. 51, Melbourne, Catholic Intercultural Resource Centre, 1987).

with the industrialised West, so industrialisation began to increase. This led to increased work for money and greater education for skills." As a result, "[M]arried women began to seek paid employment and a greater variety of family types emerged."⁷⁴

Detailed historical work on Italy and Italians, in contrast, suggests that the region and its people were tightly integrated into the heart of the capitalist world economy for well over a century. Three themes are particularly significant. First, even when no factories were built in Italy, Italians provided essential labour for capitalist development elsewhere. Secondly, factories were only one form of "modern" enterprise; they coexisted with, and often depended on, a range of other forms of production for sale. Finally, what many commentators see as a timeless backwardness of some regions in Italy is in fact the partial result of de-industrialization attendant upon the influx of cheaper goods on the world markets.

For more than 100 years Italy — and its south in particular — had been one of the largest suppliers of labour power, whether to the Americas, other European countries, or Australia. The outflow of workers peaked between 1890 and 1914, fell to nineteenth-century levels in the interwar years, and then grew to a mass movement again after the Second World War. With Italy's entry into the European Economic Community, the south consolidated its place as an important supplier of cheap labour, not only to the north of Italy, but to other EEC countries.⁷⁵ It has been estimated that between 1789 and the 1970s, 27 million humble workers left Italy. These people represented one of the largest migration systems in a very mobile modern world. The majority of those who left returned; today they are the grandparents and parents of a sizeable proportion (if not the majority) of the current nation of Italians.⁷⁶

In her work on Italians of the world, Gabaccia points out that three nineteenth-century developments created massive demand for wage labour: the emancipation of slaves in the Americas and the associated threat to the wealth of empires dependent on extracting raw materials from colonial plantations and mines; the emergence of new national states in sparsely populated regions wrested from indigenous peoples in Canada, South America, and Australia; and the spread of industrialization from its old centres in northwestern Europe. Emigrants from Italy were prominent among those who replaced emancipated African plantation workers in Louisiana and Brazil, populated the plains of Argentina, the United States, and Australia, mined the iron and coal demanded by new factories, built the canals, railroads, and tunnels to transport them, and worked in the factories themselves. In the great cities of the United States, Italians paved streets and laid tracks

74 D. Storer, "Introduction" in D. Storer, ed., *Ethnic Family Values in Australia* (Sydney: Prentice Hall, 1985), p. 5.

75 M. Martiniello, "Italy: Two Perspectives. Racism in Paradise?", *Race and Class*, vol. 32, no. 3 (1991), p. 79.

76 Gabaccia, "Is Everywhere Nowhere?", pp. 1116, 1120, 1122.

for street railways. They dug tunnels for railroads, sewers, and subways and constructed urban water systems. They built bridges, factories, tenements, department stores, and skyscrapers.⁷⁷

In most of these labour markets, Italian men were excluded from better-paid, more skilled and permanent working-class jobs which could support a family. Such conditions were tolerated, in part, because of the men's particular understanding of their own economic strategies. Most saw themselves as itinerant workers whose permanent homes were in Italy. Men's remittances were crucial parts of widely based family and regional economies; women's work in agricultural subsistence production underwrote men's departures and returns, and subsistence production remained an important dimension of family economies during Italy's mass migrations.⁷⁸ Italian workers were not only significant as the "hands" which powered industrialization and underwrote "development" in other parts of the world; the money they sent home represented a key component of the Italian economy. Goddard notes that, before the First World War, annual remittances from emigrants were almost twice as much as the income from tourism, and greater than half of the national debt.⁷⁹

The second point, already implied in description of the crucial role of Italian workers in building the very infrastructure of modernity, concerns a critique of the equation of modernity with large industrial enterprises. Outwork and decentralized enterprises are often seen as remnants of pre-industrial, craft production. There is much evidence that, on the contrary, they are brought into existence as an integral part of some of the most "modern" forms of contemporary capitalist production. This point was made forcefully by scholars such as Kriedte and Samuel with regard to the first phase of industrialization in England. During this time, different modes of production, authority relations, and levels of technology not only existed side by side, but were frequently directly dependent on each other. The most advanced sectors of the economy were often responsible for much of the massive growth of contemporary "pre-industrial" production, for which they often provided cheaper and more plentiful raw materials, just as, at a later stage of industrial development, they could lead to its wholesale destruction.⁸⁰ Samuel, writing about the later part of nineteenth century, makes the same point: mechanization in one department of production was often complemented by an increase in sweating in others; the growth of large firms by a proliferation of small producing units; the concentration of work in factories by the spread of outwork in the home.⁸¹

77 D. Gabaccia, "Gli italiani nel mondo: Italy's Workers Around the World", *Magazine of History*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1999), pp. 13–14.

78 Gabaccia, "Is Everywhere Nowhere?" p. 1126.

79 Goddard, *Gender, Family, and Work in Naples*, pp. 25, 33.

80 P. Kriedte, *Peasants, Landlords and Merchant Capitalists: Europe and the World Economy, 1500–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 144.

81 R. Samuel, "Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in Mid-Victorian Britain", *History Workshop*, no. 3 (1977), pp. 6–72.

Today, some scholars note, decentralized production, outworking, and development of the informal economy in some regions of Europe can be explained with reference to parallel processes. Many large employers, confronted with the widespread radicalism of 1968, adopted what are now described as post-Fordist strategies: they reduced the size of their enterprises, or at least avoided further expansion. The decentralizing of production allowed for contraction without loss to the enterprise because it was the subcontractors' machines and spaces that were left idle. Many of these firms had employed a largely female work force; when they restructured, women lost jobs in factories and took up similar work as statistically invisible outworkers or as workers in family enterprises in the informal economy. The economy "modernized", but women's participation in the work force fell.⁸²

After two centuries of exporting labour over the globe, Italy has, over the last three decades, for the first time become a significant destination for immigrants. A number of commentators have noted that many of these workers play an essential role in the current transformation of Italian society. As Italian emigrants have done before them, the newcomers facilitate the reproduction and growth of "non-traditional" work relationships. Their irregular wage employment, irregular self-employment, and coerced work lower labour costs, increase competition, and provide a source of domestic help for double-career families. Immigrant networks constantly feed the flux of irregular workers; the modernization of Italian society becomes embedded, at least in part, in private initiative and collective support networks of people considered "outsiders".⁸³ The unprecedented conjuncture of immigration and low fertility rates over the last two decades helped rekindle wide-ranging debates about the existence or lack of an Italian national identity; many commentators argue that it helped consolidate a unified notion of Italian character.

Ethnicity, Tradition, and Italian Identity

In Australia my father was a "nigger" but I was an Australian. I was one of them but my father wasn't.⁸⁴

[I]n the fifties I had an Italian boyfriend. It was terrible ... the Aussie guys I knew, who had never noticed me before, started making sexual passes at me and yelling sexual abuse at me when we went down the street.... If an Australian girl went with an Italian boy — you knew she had nothing more to lose.⁸⁵

82 Goddard, *Gender, Family, and Work in Naples*, pp. 35–43.

83 M. Ambrosini, "Convenienze nascoste. L'inserimento degli immigrati nell'economia informale", *Studi di Sociologia*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1998), pp. 233–257.

84 Recollections of a peasant born in Australia of parents from Friuli, quoted in Holmes, *Cultural Disenchantments*, p. 72.

85 Quoted in J. Martin, "Non-English Speaking Migrant Women in Australia" in N. Grieve and A. Burns, *Australian Women: New Feminist Perspectives* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 236.

Discussions about different fertility rates of national groups, I noted earlier, necessarily cut across definitions of ethnicity, both in the self-identification of people from particular regions and in the varied reactions to their presence elsewhere. In making sense of these issues, it is useful to draw on a routine distinction between “primordial” views of the nature of ethnic ties and sentiments, and notions of ethnicity as a resource to be mobilized. A strong version of primordialism holds that ethnic ties are universal, natural, and given in all human association, as much as are speech or kinship. This is a position supported by many nationalists but few scholars except certain sociobiologists. The weak version of primordialism claims that ethnic ties and sentiments are deep-seated and non-rational so far as the participants are concerned; members of ethnic communities feel that their community has existed “from time immemorial” and that its symbols and traditions possess a “deep antiquity” which gives them a unique power. Other theorists (from Marxists to rational choice and elite competition theorists) tend to view ethnicity as a resource to be utilized, or an instrument to be employed, by particular groups in pursuit of further ends, usually of a political or economic nature. For all these theorists, cultural and symbolic aspects of ethnicity are accessory to fundamental struggles in which the ethnic constituency constitutes a “site of mobilization”. This view is held even where due weight is given to the affective aspects of ethnic ties.⁸⁶ Theorists who focus on exploitation and racism conceptualize ethnicity in a similar way: as a set of categories used by dominant social groups to justify their own privilege and the exclusion of others. Here, research on ethnicity overlaps with recent writings on the making of whiteness. In the work of a number of scholars, whiteness is considered alongside other notions of ethnicity as a particular cultural achievement that carries significant social and economic benefits.⁸⁷ Such literature is of particular relevance to discussions of Italian migration history. In more prosperous regions of Italy, as in other parts of Europe and its colonies, southern Italian migrants were for a long time regarded and treated as “the Chinese of Europe”, dark-skinned people of partial African origin who were not only culturally but racially distinct from their more “civilized” neighbours.⁸⁸

Some of the most influential critics of primordial notions of ethnicity, with their depiction of traditions as powerful motive forces of deep antiquity, have been scholars who stress the socially constructed character of “invented tra-

86 A. D. Smith, “The Politics of Culture: Ethnicity and Nationalism” in T. Ingold, ed. *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 707.

87 See, for example, D. R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); I. Haney-Lopez, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); M. F. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

88 D. Gabaccia, “The ‘Yellow Peril’ and the ‘Chinese of Europe’: Global Perspectives on Race and Labor, 1815–1930” in J. Lucassen and L. Lucassen, eds., *Migration, Migration History, History: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), pp. 177–196.

ditions". Hobsbawm and Ranger, whose widely debated work forms the starting point of much of this approach, define invented traditions as a "set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past". They are distinctive in that the continuity with a suitable historic past that they invoke is largely fictitious, sometimes even involving outright forgery. While nationalist texts, speeches, and ceremonies typically emphasize the ancient origin of the traditions they are upholding, defending, and celebrating, many of these institutions and traditions were only recently invented in a process in which the nationalists themselves played a prominent part.⁸⁹ The authors note that institutions and practices associated with the national state are particularly rich in the use of invented traditions. Not only have histories been rewritten and re-imagined to create an appropriate continuity with ancient precedents; a whole battery of entirely new symbols and devices, such as national flags and anthems, came into existence as part of national movements.⁹⁰ Such imaginings were not confined to those in power; they were — and are — equally significant to their socialist, feminist, or nationalist opponents, as well as to ethnic minorities. Together, they have come to constitute important elements of people's individual and collective identity.

For the purposes of this discussion, not only is the conceptual language of tradition well suited to the articulation of individual, ethnic, and national identities; the demographers' favourite cultural tools, the questionnaire and the interview, lend themselves particularly well to the display of coherent repertoires of valued cultural attributes. As Pessar puts it:

In a formal research setting, such as one in which surveys or structured interviews are administered, an immigrant woman's decision to cloak her own and her family's experiences in a discourse of unity, female sacrifice, and the woman's subordination to the patriarch represents a safe, respectful and respectable "text". As I look back on my own research, this is the female voice that usually emerged from my own attempts at survey research. By contrast, my ethnographic collection of discourses that reveal family tensions and struggles emerged far more frequently out of encounters where my own presence was incidental, that is, not the defining purpose for the ensuing dialogue, or after many months of participant observation has substantially reduced the initial formality and suspicion.⁹¹

89 See, for example, E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

90 E. Geoff, "Nationalism and Social History", *Social History*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1981), p. 91.

91 P. R. Pessar, "Engendering Migration Studies: The Case of New Immigrants in the United States", *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 42, no. 4 (1999), p. 586.

Whatever their differences, most authors agree that ethnicity only arises in particular circumstances. States are deeply implicated in this process. They sponsor or constitute the focus of nationalism. State institutions define the allowable formalities of emigration and immigration, play a part in describing and constituting social categories, help construct social and economic conditions which migrants leave and encounter as they cross borders. At times, states structure access to scarce resources so that only sizeable and relatively coherent groups have access to them. In this way, rival enumerations of the respective sizes of ethnic communities translate into greater or lesser funding, more or fewer jobs, or a certain number of hours of “ethnic” broadcasts. In turn, in making use of resources such as migrant resource centres, language classes, and health services, ethnic groups gain coherence as distinct entities.

Recent collaborative work on “Italians of the world” has provided particularly valuable evidence regarding this process. First, the initial mass waves of Italian migration in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century predated the formation of the Italian state. Even after 1861, the existence of any form of national identity could not be taken for granted. Before 1920, half of Italy’s migrants were illiterate; few spoke the Tuscan dialect designated as official Italian. Indeed, a large proportion of migrants first became “Italian” only when they left home: when they encountered government record-keepers, people from other parts of Italy, or anti-Italian sentiment abroad. Going about the mundane task of finding work, they responded to other state’s official demands for passports and other documents, health inspections, taxes, census enumerations, military service, departure, naturalization, and loyalty. The category “Italian”, they learned, was the appropriate answer when asked particular questions about their origins by strangers. Returning home, they found themselves called *americani*, *germanesi*, or *australiani* by neighbours.⁹²

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the existence or otherwise of a distinct ethnic identity was closely linked to the history of particular nation-states. In countries such as Switzerland and Germany, which never acknowledged the significant part that migration played in their modern histories, granted citizenship to children born on its soil, or allowed for the easy naturalization of foreigners, migrants from Italy became — and remained — Italians. In France, the arrival of large numbers of immigrants at particular points in history is acknowledged, but their perceived rapid incorporation into the nation made most invisible as distinctive social or cultural groups — not least because statisticians have on principle omitted to count them.⁹³ In Latin America, Italian immigrants were understood to have contributed to the development of a culturally hybrid Latin nation. In the United States, Australia, and Canada, in contrast, the strong emphasis on the Britishness or

92 Gabaccia, “Is Everywhere Nowhere?”, pp. 1116, 1125.

93 P. Simon, “Nationality and Origins in French Statistics: Ambiguous Categories”, *Population: An English Selection*, vol. 11 (1999), pp. 193–220.

even Englishness of the host nation contributed to the rise and maintenance of distinct — and publicly enumerated — non-English ethnic identities. Gabaccia concludes that “Italian diasporas” (in the plural) might well have preceded, in time, an Italian nation. In turn, they became the targets of a whole range of twentieth-century nationalist initiatives as sites of Italian nation-building.⁹⁴

There is no space or need to survey Australian work on ethnicity, which covers the full spectrum of the approaches mentioned here. Rather, I use two representative works to help conclude my argument. The first, written by one of a new generation of critical scholars of Italian origin, was originally published in a modest but widely used series by the Ecumenical Migration Centre. In “From Coercion to Choice”, Pallotta-Chiarolli analysed questionnaires filled in by 25 school girls from southern Italian background in Adelaide. Influenced by anti-racist forms of feminist theory, the author contrasted what she saw as “traditional, conservative patriarchal culture of migrant home and ethnic community” with the “modern, liberal patriarchal structure of the wider Anglo-Australian society”. While she “deconstructed” ignorant stereotypes of southern Italian “traditions”, took issue with depictions of a “recognizable Italian identity” in the media and sociological texts, and collected data on the socioeconomic status of the girls’ parents, Pallotta-Chiarolli framed her conclusions in terms of the interplay between two cultures, between tradition and modernity: “[A]lthough generally moving beyond the traditional beliefs of parents, [the young women’s] responses and opinions display a mixture of conservative and non-conservative trends, a personal value-system drawing from both traditional and modern influences.”⁹⁵

The author clearly felt that there was an Italian-Australian identity, which she proudly shared with her respondents. The young women, in turn, all believed that their “values and lifestyles as an adolescent of Italian background are different from those of Anglo-Australian adolescent females”, even though they did not agree on what the main differences were and what caused them.⁹⁶ Work such as this sets out to map the dimensions of what is intuitively felt to be a vibrant and tangible — albeit changing — ethnic identity, at times as part of a journey of self-discovery. The meanings of “tradition” might be contested, but the term remains significant in making sense of the present.

In contrast, a number of Marxist scholars assert that many characteristics routinely attributed to ethnicity in fact constitute a logical response to difficulties of settlement and discriminatory policies of the work place and of government. In a well-researched book on working-class organization in post-war heavy industry in Australia, for example, Lever-Tracy and Quinlan

94 Gabaccia, “Is Everywhere Nowhere?”

95 M. Pallotta-Chiarolli, “From Coercion to Choice: Second Generation Women Seeking a Personal Identity in the Italo-Australian Setting”, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1990), p. 52.

96 Santow and Bracher, “Traditional Families and Fertility Decline”.

conclude from a comparison of the different industries and unions that the special characteristics of being an immigrant can be seen to coexist with a wide array of both union and employer strategies, which leads to a number of different responses and perspectives among immigrant workers. The distinctive attitudes derived from ethnic cultures (conceived in non-class terms) play a relatively weak role in explaining this variety. “The class relationships and institutional structures experienced by immigrants ... can be portrayed more easily as the primary shaping factors.”⁹⁷ In their trenchant critique of primordialist, psychological explanations of industrial relations, Lever-Tracy and Quinlan go further than disputing the role of ethnicity. In many ways, their detailed work also provides evidence for the failure of ethnic forms of industrial association to emerge.

Today, structural factors, however constituted, figure prominently in both scholarly and common-sense understanding of falling fertility rates. The Australian welfare state, labour market, and other social institutions are by no means “family friendly”. Yet they are gendered in significantly different ways from those of Italy. If fertility rates depend, to an appreciable extent, on social structures, Italian babies in Australia cannot be explained with reference to a transnational “Italian culture”. Indeed, a number of Australian demographers concluded that the fertility of Italian women in Australia does not differ from others in similar economic circumstances. Can babies, after all, be deduced from class relations?

Conclusion

Demography, as noted earlier, has a heavy investment in accurate mapping of the social. While it has made many valuable contributions to the analysis of contemporary demographic reversals, the discipline seems as far as ever from explaining the dynamics of fertility change. In their attempts to develop explanations with greater predictive power, many demographers have participated in a recent “cultural turn” in the social sciences. In these conceptual endeavours, the twin themes of tradition and modernity play a significant role. While modernization theory is widely acknowledged to be inadequate as a shorthand explanation of contemporary demographic trends, its underlying assumptions continue to inform alternative explanations. I argue that social historians provide a more accurate rendering of the past. Attentive to the specificity and diversity of social structures, as well as to the internal rationality of people’s “cultures”, such explanations better meet Tipps’s criterion of empirical accuracy. Does this mean that social historians provide a superior form of population thinking?

One of the most powerful critiques of early formulations of the concept of “invented tradition” had to do with historical accuracy. The critics did not

97 C. Lever-Tracy and M. Quinlan, *A Divided Working Class: Ethnic Segmentation and Industrial Conflict in Australia* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), p. 316.

question the usefulness of various projects of uncovering the “true genesis” of various traditions, but objected to an assumed linkage between veracity and social efficacy. What matters, they argued, is not so much whether a particular rendering of tradition and national heritage is more or less accurate, but the process whereby certain beliefs and understandings become part of common sense, of everyday culture, of an orientation to social action. Cultural traditions become bases for nationalism — or ethnic identity — when they effectively constitute historical memory, when they inculcate it as “habitus” or as “prejudice”, not when (or because) their claims relate to an “accurate” rendering of social history.⁹⁸

Accuracy is less than helpful to exasperated parents using “tradition” as a strategic resource in disciplining children and in establishing respect and security in a new land. The vague but powerful sense of Italianness researchers such as Pallotta-Chiarolli share with their respondents is no less “real” if the people in question get their elementary historical facts hopelessly muddled. Conversely, the strategic significance of “tradition” in “orientation to social action” makes it the explicit object of everyday cultural contestation, and at times of social movements. In one of her commentaries on the current state of feminist theory in Italy, for example, Passerini contrasts Mediterranean and northern archetypes of motherhood: one, “the mythical image of the omnipotent Great Mother, capable of giving life as well as of taking it away, a devouring and terrifying type of motherhood”; the other, to which it has often been counterposed, “the Northern emancipated woman, free of traditional chains but also free of the charms of traditional femininity”. She argues that Italian feminists of the 1970s and early 1980s “lived through a profound rebellion against the traditional ideas of the mother and rejected them, often rejecting motherhood themselves altogether or leaving it until later in life”.⁹⁹ The debate over the “social value of motherhood” that Italian feminists had at the end of the nineteenth century, Passerini concludes, should be reopened to forge a new model of womanhood. It is precisely this general debate that Australian feminists from Italian background struggle with when they write about “coercion and choice” or “the best of both worlds”.

In many ways, it does not really matter whether the traditions that make up ethnic consciousness are historically accurate. Accuracy does matter, however, when it comes to the predictive capacity of social theory. It is more essential still for the planning capacity of state instrumentalities. As other contributors to this collection point out, “the social” has recently been contested on a number of political and conceptual fronts. In many communities, demographers have helped make visible another fundamental challenge: the fall of fertility rates far below the level of social reproduction. In their attempts to comprehend more precisely what many see as a profound “social

98 C. Calhoun, “Nationalism and Ethnicity”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 19 (1993), p. 222.

99 L. Passerini, “The Interpretation of Democracy in the Italian Women’s Movement of the 1970s and 1980s”, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 17, nos. 2–3 (1994), p. 237.

pathology”, demographers and others have undermined some of the conceptual foundations of their subject. Insofar as they relied on modernization theory, studies of demographic transitions failed to confirm many of the working hypotheses around which they were built. At the same time, in conducting detailed studies of specific communities, anthropologists, historians, and other scholars provide what are arguably more empirically accurate explanations of procreative behaviour — ones based on discontinuities, alternative strategies, mutual dependencies and exploitations, different rationalities and traditions, cultures and economies. Such theoretical “deconstructions” of modernity and tradition stand alongside more widely based reappraisals of sex and gender relations. These debates and fights, heartaches and illuminations, sullen standoffs and loving accommodations, involving powerful social movements and profound questions of self-identity, spanning some of the most fundamental relations between men and women and the young and the old, are not likely to be resolved in a hurry. While they last, Foucauldian visions of a perfectly comprehended social will have to wait.