

Fertility, Class, and Gender in Britain 1860–1940

Review Number:

5

Publish date:

Sunday, 1 September, 1996

Author:

Simon Szreter

ISBN:

9780521343435

Date of Publication:

1996

Price:

£110.00

Pages:

725pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521343435>

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

Michael Mason

Simon Szreter's remarkable and very important book argues, in effect, that coincidence has deceived the historians of family sexuality in the period 1860 - 1960. The birth-rate per family in England and Wales declined ever more steeply in this hundred year period, and it declined with roughly the same timing and speed in most other European countries. Historians would dearly love the whole story to be one unitary phenomenon, and indeed this is how it is normally understood. Now Simon Szreter has come along, admonishing the historians that their cherished unitary fertility decline is riddled with coincidence. The appearance of one effect linking bedrooms of 1860 with those of 1960, and English bedrooms with those in Finland and Spain, is illusory, according to Szreter. If he is right, he has completely rewritten this tract of English social history, and also created a model for enquiry into the subject which will be influential for years to come.

I have somewhat exaggerated the degree of belief, among historians, in a unitary fertility decline. For a long time it was indeed supposed that around 1860 married couples had started doing most of the things to prevent conception which they do for that purpose nowadays. More recently historians have come to doubt if late 19th-century birth-control was in fact achieved by barrier methods. They have also performed close studies of particular groups which suggest that there was great diversity within the courtship and bedroom practices (including those affecting fertility) in English society at any one time.

As Szreter complains, such developments in the historians' thinking should have shaken the whole theoretical edifice of a pan-European homogenous fertility decline to its foundations, but they have not. We

now recognize that pre-20th-century birth-control was not a matter of modern-minded couples taking advantage of newly available rubbergoods and chemicals, but we still assume that the greater part of the fertility decline (at least from around the beginning of this century down to our present) *was* such a phenomenon. The continuing attractiveness of this story has much to do with its relevance to the world's currently developing countries, and the power of the international agencies concerned.

In fact our whole mistaken picture of a monolithic uptake of birth-control across modern Europe goes back to a very celebrated early official attempt to demonstrate that there had been a steady and beneficial diffusion of such techniques through English society. The census of 1911 is often called the 'fertility census', because the census-forms contained special additional questions. Households had to report on how many children had so far been born into unions. Over the next decade or so Dr T.H.C. Stevenson, superintendent of statistics at the General Register Office, worked on the answers to these special questions, seeking to analyse the figures according to a particular categorisation of English social classes. This class scheme was to prove momentous beyond anything Stevenson could have foreseen: for him at the time its relation to fertility was simply a very pleasing confirmation of what he had already believed about the nation's sex-life.

Stevenson's scheme was nothing less than the five-tier, one-dimensional, occupation-based division of classes which remains, in essence, orthodox and official in the present day, eighty years later. Stevenson's version went as follows: I Professional, II Intermediate, III Skilled Manual, IV Intermediate, V Unskilled Manual. There have been lots of complaints from historians over the years about the inadequacy of this list, but with slight revisions it remains ascendant. Stevenson's emphasis on occupation and skills had at first been a response to the agenda set by eugenicists, whose hereditarian theories were being increasingly resisted, according to Szreter, by a 'confident, revitalized and more comprehensive environmentalist analysis' in institutions of social policy such as the GRO. The eugenicists said that low skills and high fertility were linked, leading to 'race suicide'. Given his environmentalist views, Stevenson may have been dismayed when he saw that the linkage predicted by the eugenicists in fact held. But he also saw an alternative line of argument, which accepted the linkage but overtrumped the hereditarian explanation with an impeccably environmentalist one. Birth-control was the key. It was 'diffusing' slowly from the educated and prosperous in a gradient through the less educated and poorer ranks.

Szreter's very detailed and densely expounded account of these events in Whitehall around the years of the Great War takes up just a third of his extraordinarily wide-ranging book. He goes on to tackle the much deeper questions which the operations of the fertility census of 1911 so clearly raise. The ideology informing the census would be a matter of very restricted historiographical interest if Stevenson's claims about a spreading culture of birth-control had been correct. Still, a less tigerish and ambitious historian than Szreter might have been content to let the matter rest there. That is not Szreter's style. He asks head-on, 'Was Stevenson right?'

Szreter is confident that Stevenson was wrong, even on his own showing. The argument involved here is somewhat elaborate. Stevenson, and demographers ever since, have held that true birth-control - in the sense of full sexual relations between partners performed with the deliberate adjunct of devices and substances believed to prevent conception - will most clearly show up in the statistics in the 'stopping' rather than 'spacing' of births. Large numbers of couples will be detectable as at first producing children at something like the biologically maximum rate - and then producing no more. Stevenson claimed that stopping behaviour was discernible as 'diffusing' in the English social classes across time. The published data of 1911 do not permit Szreter to check this claim for couples who through ageing or death had finished having families by this date (the larger category), but he is able to perform the neat trick of checking it for the smaller category of younger couples who were still producing children. We can work out if this group, at least, was 'spacing' or 'stopping'.

They were spacing. They do not exhibit the hallmark of birth-control required by Stevenson. There is an obvious way to rescue Stevenson at this point, in his own despite. Why can't spacing be a token of artefactually controlled conception, just as much as stopping? Szreter does not rest his case only on a

refutation of Stevenson, on his own terms. He agrees that spacing of births could in principle be the result of birth-control. But he has drawn a further and more profound observation from the published tables of the 1911 census. This is that low fertility achieved by spacing correlates with late marriage. Couples of child-bearing age who were conceiving rather infrequently were also likely to have postponed getting married.

This is probably the most important single result to emerge from Szreter's research, and it paves the way for his own general theory of family sexuality in the years around and after 1911, which occupies the final third of his book. It was, according to Szreter, a 'culture of abstinence', influential right through to Philip Larkin's 1963 ('Sexual intercourse began'), which mainly drove down the fertility of England and Wales. On this account, diffusionism is out of the window. There was no wisdom about obtaining and using certain devices and substances which needed to percolate down from the privileged to the less privileged. Moreover, the thinking which impelled couples to resort to birth-control via 'abstinence' was, according to Szreter, one which wouldn't yield a simple correlation with social rank. Couples took steps to reduce numbers of conceptions in response to the 'perceived relative cost' of childbearing. This pivotal concept in Szreter's whole argument is developed by him with great subtlety to suggest how fertility-control will crop up in a much more complicated, sporadic pattern than that predicted by Stevenson's diffusionism.

The 'perceived relative cost' of having a child may be a 'cost' in the purest economic sense, that is, whether a child will earn or lose its parents money, but also a 'cost' in a more rarefied sense: how much prestige attaches to fatherhood, for instance. This approach to the analysis of fertility is not novel. It is a respectable theory in modern demography, and has been applied previously to the 19th-century data. Szreter is pioneering in the way he has put the perceived relative costs approach to work in detail right across English society, while exploiting the full range of the powerful notion of 'costs'.

I have invoked Larkin's 1963, and it may appear that what Szreter has done in this book is simply to provide academic support for a familiar modern cliché about English sexual culture in the 20th century, namely that sexual ignorance and repression was widespread until about twenty years after the outbreak of World-War II. This cliché coexists with an older chronological model, which locates the end of repression around 1900. It is still orthodox to call repressive sexual attitudes 'Victorian', even when they are detected in the 1950s. Szreter's book is not an annexe to the new view, or at least is not conceived by him to be such. To start with, he insists that his 'culture of abstinence' was not driven by negative feelings about sex, such as guilt, fear, or disgust. As I have explained, for him abstinence was the English way of adjusting fertility in response to the perceived relative costs of having children.

Secondly, he seeks to erase the Victorian/20th century divide more thoroughly than is ever envisaged in the popular demonizing accounts of 20th-century sexuality before P.J. Proby and Christine Keeler. His book may be thought of as an 'anti-1911' text in three respects. As well as debunking '1911', in the narrow sense of the fertility census, on ideological and statistical grounds, Szreter would also like to draw a radical corollary from the fallaciousness of Stevenson which has been somewhat shunned. Szreter wants to insist that the Stevensonian account is a fantasy, about past, present *and* future in 1911. He is convincing on how investigations which appeared to confirm Stevenson - most notably the Royal Commission on Population of 1944-9 - failed to pick up the true extent of English couples' resort to mere refraining from intercourse and *coitus interruptus*. Nothing at all happened in 1911, according to Szreter. The failure of historians who should know better to face this thought is perhaps linked to the continuing general prestige of the 'modern' moment represented by the pre-Great War years. This is when Cubism, Dada, Relativity and Quantum Theory, *The Rite of Spring*, *Sons and Lovers*, and so on, all happened. We can't quite shake off the conviction that there was a revolution in sexuality too.

It is important to grasp what Szreter means by 'abstinence'. He thinks of it as closely affiliated to marriage-postponement, as I have mentioned. He *also* thinks of it as essentially the same kind of behaviour as *coitus interruptus*, the latter being a compromise arrived at by couples when an intention to abstain was not found achievable: 'couples in British society who engaged in a regime of coitus interruptus were involved in essentially the same "game" of sexual self-restraint as those practising the various forms of conscious abstinence'. This is an unorthodox and arresting way to see the matter, but surprisingly persuasive.

Couples do not have to be all that abstinent, in order to achieve a useful reduction in fertility. We perhaps tend to think of coital frequency as involving a threshold, as far as the chances of conception go. We assume that some sex is just as likely to produce a conception as a lot of sex. This is a fallacy. The relation between quantity of sex and conceiving is continuous. Even if you only manage to restrict yourself to sex once a week you will still manage to postpone conception by eight months from when it could be expected if you have sex four times a week. If you can bring the rate down to once a fortnight you are buying eighteen conception-free months.

So in many respects Szreter's 'abstinence' fits readily into his whole account. It was not an obsessive, overly stringent, or even completely binding sexual regime. It is feasible that it survived for about a century, not coming into collision either with militant sexual rigour as represented by the Social Purity movement, or with sexual emancipation as represented by Bloomsbury and its heirs. It is perhaps feasible that it was deployed to achieve reduced fertility when the perceived relative costs of children made this desirable. But there must be doubts about this crucial point of convergence in Szreter's whole structure of argument. *Will* you be abstemious in sex, even in the qualified way outlined by Szreter, simply to achieve fertility-control? Does there not need also to be cultural encouragement from a climate of antagonism to sex?

I quote Szreter discussing why 'a culture of sexual disinclination' was not a prerequisite for his 'culture of abstinence': "the balance of the demographic and cultural evidence appears to point to the greater importance of deliberate, negotiated birth regulation as a positive motive, albeit one that was mediated through a culture of anti-sexuality". There is something fudging about the last clause. What is it to 'negotiate' sexual abstinence 'through' anti-sexuality? Either couples agreed to refrain from doing something they both liked because they didn't want too many children, or they felt (perhaps mutually and explicitly, perhaps not) that sex was a bit repugnant. Szreter's combination of the two kinds of behaviour does not seem workable. One cannot imagine a contribution from 'anti-sexuality' which would not exclude or at least inhibit 'negotiation'.

This important awkwardness in Szreter's argument is, it must be said, a result of one of the most impressive and exciting features of his whole procedure. This is a book of astonishingly wide compass in the variety of information it contrives to bring together. It ranges from the technicalities of population statistics through to an up-to-date and comprehensive review of the literature on the qualitative aspects of English sexuality in the 19th and 20th centuries (with an important piece of civil service history thrown in for good measure). I can think of no book which goes so far to break down the formidable barriers between the various approaches to the history of family sexuality. Here is a trained statistician who is also completely versed in the non-quantitative literature, and eager to bring the two into connection.

Szreter could simply have ducked the problem of how late 19th-century 'anti-sexuality' bears on his picture of abstinence 'negotiated' between partners in the interests of an affordable number of conceptions. He could have quietly skipped over the Social Purity movement and the associated literature, but this would have been foreign to his voracious, embracing style. This is a militant book, but also very generous-minded for the way in which so many co-workers in the field, some of them writing in a very different vein, are warmly cited and accommodated in its argument. In such a catholic atmosphere one must be struck by *inutility* of Michel Foucault, whose *History of Sexuality* is not once cited. I am sure this is not a mischievous omission, but simply the fault of the vacuousness of that celebrated but little-read book.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/5#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/131>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>