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Childlessness and Third Births

A Differentiated View on the Fertility Decline in Germany

1. Research Questions and Main Theses

During the last 50 years, birth rates have declined in almost all European societies, in the course of the second demographic transition. Judging from cohort fertility, this process has now come to an end in Germany with the birth cohort of 1968 having 1.49 births per woman – fewer than any other cohort before or after (Bujard/Sulak 2015). We take this observation as an occasion to review and re-evaluate the birth decline in Germany. Our questions are: Are the description and the interpretation of this birth decline accurate and complete? How plausible are the existing theoretical explanations? We approach these questions with a theoretical reflection as well as with empirical analyses based on micro-census data and on qualitative content analyses of newspapers.

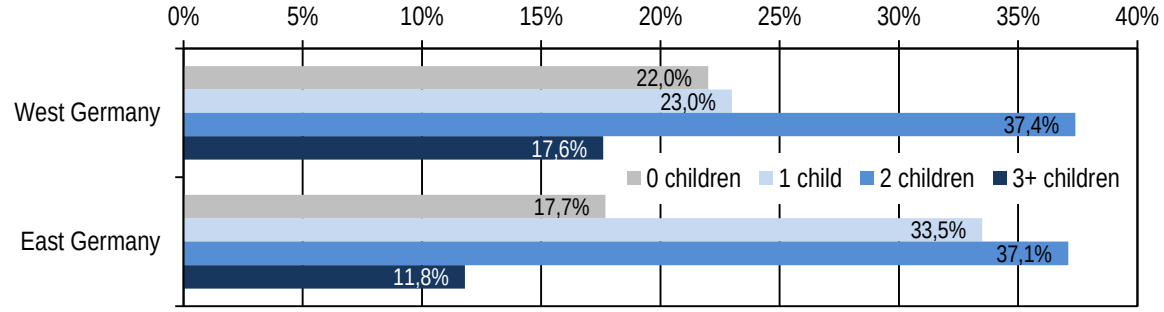
Our main theses are: The description of the birth decline can only be accurate and complete if it is based on parities, whereas the predominant share of empirical papers focuses on the average number of births per woman (measured as total fertility rate or as cohort fertility). The differentiation into parities reveals that we can distinguish two changes in fertility behaviour, occurring, more or less, simultaneously: (1) The number of women remaining childless strongly increases and (2) the number of women having three or more births strongly decreases, while the parities one and two remain roughly stable. The speed of these two processes changes throughout the overall birth decline, so that two phases can be distinguished: a first phase of rapid decline in third births and a second phase of comparably fast increase in childlessness. This as well as theoretical reflections on the plausibility of arguments suggests that also the explanations for the two processes need to be differentiated. Whereas the predominant theoretical interpretations of the birth decline discuss a general postponement and lack of births and give plausible explanations especially for emerging childlessness (such as individualisation, value change or opportunity costs), there is a tendency to ignore the decrease of third births as a second crucial driving force. To compensate for the lack of plausible explanations for this second process, cultural theories of the two child ideal and the discrimination of large families need to be developed.

2. Methodological Pre-considerations

The most frequently used indicators for describing changes in fertility are the total fertility rate (TFR) and the cohort fertility (CFR). Both indicate and estimate the number of births a woman in a given society has on average (between ages 15 and 45). Their main advantage is that they summarise a complex set of behavioural patterns to one single number that can be compared in its cross-sectional variation over societies as well as in its development over time. Also, they give sufficient information for estimating the demographic consequences of changes and differences in fertility.

Nevertheless, they lack information since the average number of births per woman can reflect various distributions across parities. The comparison of East and West Germany gives a good example: In both parts of the country the birth cohort 1970 has 1.5 births per woman (CFR). Nevertheless the distributions behind this average number differ (cf. figure 1): Whereas West Germany has relatively large shares of women remaining either childless or having three or more children, East Germany has a large share of women with only one birth instead. This raises the question whether and, if so, in what way the description and the explanation of the birth decline need to be adjusted if it is examined based on the distribution across parities, instead of the birth rates.

Figure 1: Parities of Women of the Birth Cohort 1970 in East and West Germany



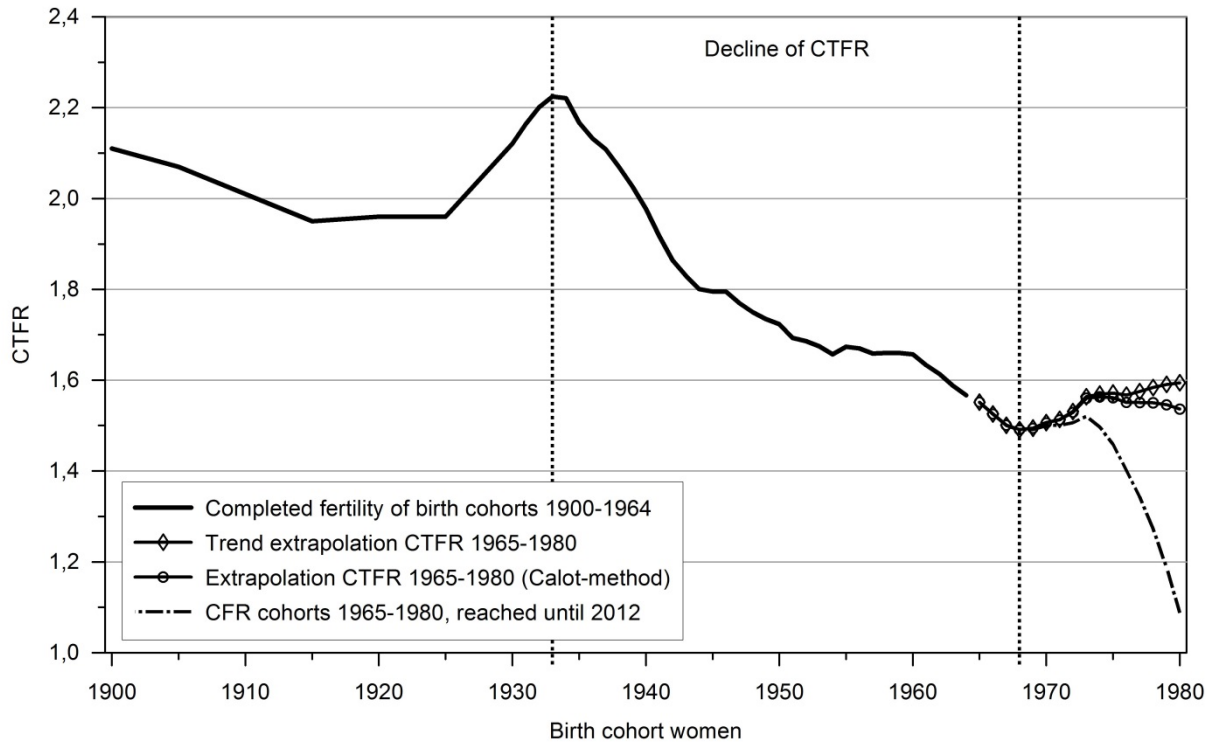
Calculation: BiB. Source of Data: Micro-census 2012, German Statistical Office.

3. A Differentiated Description of the Birth Decline in Germany

Looking at total fertility rates (TFR), the fertility in Germany (in East and in West Germany) declines within one decade, between 1965 and 1975, starting at about 2.5 and resulting in about 1.4 births per woman. West Germany has maintained this level very stable since then. East Germany has reached it again recently, after various fluctuations.

Looking at cohort fertility (CFR), fertility in Germany has slowly and mainly steadily decreased since the birth cohorts 1933, starting at about 2.2 and resulting in the negative peak at 1.49 births per woman in 1968 (cf. figure 2). There are contradictory predictions regarding the amount of an increase in the close future (Myrskylä et al. 2013; Pötsch 2016). However, there is some agreement that the decline of cohort fertility has stopped.

Figure 2: The Birth Decline in Germany, Measured in Terms of Cohort Fertility (CFR) of the Birth Cohorts 1900 to 1980

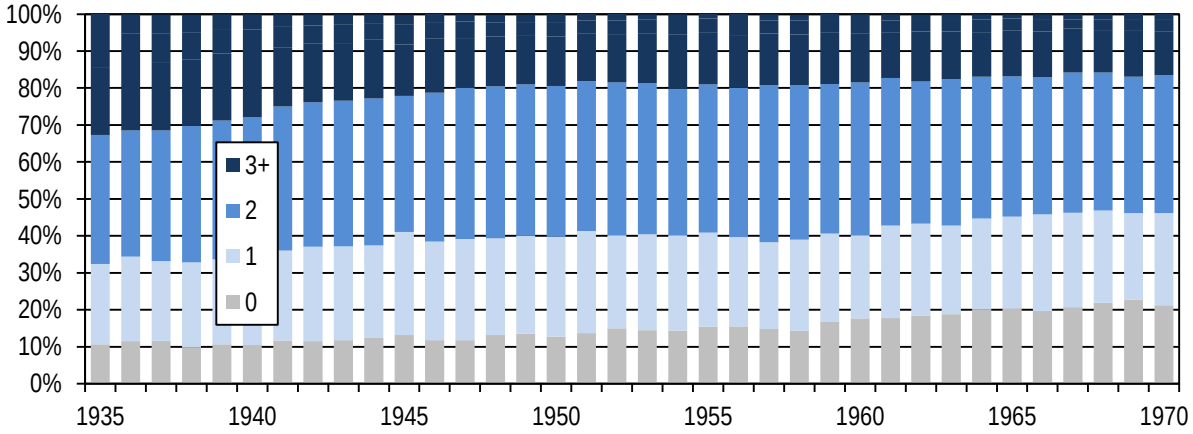


Calculation: Bujard/Sulak 2016. Source of Data: Micro-census 2012, German Statistical Office.

The change of the distribution over parities (cf. figure 3) reveals that there is no general decrease in the chance of having a(nother) child. Instead, the fertility decline occurs parity-specific: The shares of the parities one and two remain stable or even slightly increase, with two children becoming a standard

number of children. The decline in fertility occurs at the edges of the distribution and can be distinguished into two processes: On the one hand, the share of women having three or more births decreases from more than 30% to about 15%. On the other hand the share of women having no child at all roughly doubles from about 10% in the first birth cohort to more than 20% in the last birth cohort.

Figure 3: The Birth Decline in Germany, Measured in Terms of Parities of the Birth Cohorts 1935 to 1970



Calculation: BiB. Source of Data: Micro-census 2012, German Statistical Office.

The analysis furthermore reveals that the two processes – the decrease of third births and the increase of childlessness – do not occur simultaneously. Between the birth cohorts 1935 and 1950, the share of childless women hardly increases at all, whereas the decrease of third births is already almost completed. From there on, the increase in childlessness accelerates and the share of women with three or more births almost remains constant. This succession partly reflects the fact that different birth cohorts meet the historic phase of fertility decline at different stages in their life course, with the earlier born having already founded a family and "only" being at risk of remaining with fewer children, whereas the later born are still childless and at risk of remaining childless. Partly, however, the succession suggests that there are actually two different processes of change in fertility behaviour that need to be distinguished and deserve to be explained specifically.

4. A Review of Theoretical Explanations for the Fertility Decline

This thesis is supported by theoretical reflections on the plausibility of arguments for explaining the fertility decline. Without explicitly defining which birth events they claim to explain, the majority of theoretical approaches to the fertility decline are much more plausible for the one parity than for the other. A plausible explanation of all parities at the same time can merely be seen in the postponement of first birth, due to longer phases of education and labour market entries, leading to shorter biographical phases of fertility (Bittman/Wajcman 2000). In addition to that, remaining childless can be well explained by the second demographic transition theory (Lesthaeghe 1983; van de Kaa 1987), referring to value change as a main cause, by a shift in individualisation (Hoffmann-Nowotny 1988; Beck 1986), by changing gender roles (Scanzoni/McMurry 1972) or by an increase in human capital and opportunity costs for children (Becker 1991; Becker/Lewis 1973).

Reasons for not having a third child are offered especially by the value of children theory (Nauck 2005; Hoffman/Hoffman 1973), arguing that the reasons for having children today are rather psychological-emotional than economic-utilitarian values, so that the "utility" of having children is already achieved with one or two children. A similar argument comes from G. S. Becker's (1991) thesis of a substitution of quantity by "quality" of children. However, these arguments have for good reasons been found to explain rather the fertility decline during the first demographic transition than

the one during the second demographic transition. Also, they make it seem much likelier that people would have one child, instead of having two, which however is the more common parity.

5. Reflections on a Potential Development of Fertility Theories

The review of theoretical explanations for the fertility decline reveals a lack of plausible explanations for the decrease in third births during the second demographic transition. However there are observations pointing to further plausible explanations that have not been developed yet as formal fertility theories. One observation is that there is an increasing standardisation in terms of a two child norm or at least of two children being considered as ideal number of children (Sobotka/Beaujouan 2014; Dorbritz/Ruckdeschel 2015). A second observation is a latent discrimination of large families (Diabaté et al. 2015; Eggen/Rupp 2006). Both may be manifestations of a cultural-normative climate that has fostered the decrease in third births. A potential development of fertility theories therefore may be found in a cultural theory of the two child ideal.

In searching for potential factors, causing such a cultural-normative climate, we have analysed the content of articles on fertility issues in two leading national German newspapers ("Die Zeit", "Der Spiegel") between 1955 and 1965 – in the years preceding the fertility decline in Germany. One result is that there has been a massive fear of overpopulation already in the early 1960s, referred to as the "demographic bomb," threatening mankind to a similar extent as the nuclear bomb. This fear led to the predominant opinion, at least among highly educated, that having more than two children would be irresponsible in modern age. This opinion was supported by the connotation of rationality, self-discipline as virtues of the modern man who should be able to control his instincts, including his sex drive. This opinion may have furthermore been supported by the association of large families with low class, poverty and deviant behaviour. This association is very present in the early 1960s. It probably has emerged much earlier. However, during the fascist regime it had been suppressed by a strongly pronatalist ideology. Also, in the 1960s this association may have been more powerful in its influence an behaviour, given a very wide-spread aspiration to be part of the bourgeois middle class.

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