

Public concern about low fertility: the 1920s and the 2020s

Tuesday 2 September, 1.30pm

Population narratives from Malthus to Musk

Dermot Grenham

There appears to be a cycle in population narratives such that in the early decade of a new century there is a change of discourse. In the early 19th century Malthus' view on population were generating heated discussion. A century later there were concerns about low birth rates and eugenic ideas were relatively widespread. John Maynard Keynes, a well known economist, was central to this discussion. Another century later and there are again concerns about low birth rates but this time the narrative includes pronatalist views championed by the likes of Elon Musk.

The purpose of this session is to put the current discussion about low birth rates in historical context in order to better understand the framing of the current narratives.

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Hypothetical Thinking and the Switch on/Switch off Policy Solution Model: intervening cell cultures and human cultures 1920s-present

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This paper addresses the hypothetical thinking that structures fertility crisis discourse and points to the limits of the switch on/switch off policy solution model for dealing with demographic change in Europe. The paper draws on data collected through ethnographies in contemporary reproductive and cell biology research labs; mixed-method analysis of media discourse and public health institution reporting on demographic data in Europe; and new readings of the career trajectory of the French surgeon Alexis Carrell (1873-1944), who invented cell culturing techniques in the 1920s at the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research in New York before going on to establish France's first public Eugenics institution dedicated to demographic research in the 1940s. Hypothetical thinking and the switch on/switch off model are elaborated as a distinctly "biological mode" for intervening life that came to be, in one instance, displaced from the cell biology lab to the demographic research institution; from studies of cellular life to studies of human populations. This paper, which shares findings from the MSCA DOROTHY cofund project "Imaging/Imagining Reproductive Crisis: time-lapse microscopy, animation and fertility discourse" (2024-2027), suggests these combined historical and ethnographic insights are key to addressing the question of how declining fertility rates have become public; the subject of public governance, public scientific knowledge production and public discussion today.

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"Britons are evolving to be poorer and less well educated": documenting the return of the eugenic concept of "dysgenic fertility" in the 2020s

Rebecca Sear - Brunel University London, Cathryn Townsend - Baylor University

"Britons are evolving to be poorer and less well educated" was a headline published in the Telegraph newspaper in 2022. It's a headline that could easily have been published 100 years earlier. The idea that the "wrong" kind of people are having "too many" children, and that this will lead to a decline in the "quality" of the human race, was popular among eugenicists in the early 20th century. These fears of "dysgenic fertility" often focused on class and cognitive ability. There were concerns that, as societies became industrialised, fertility trends emerged so that poorer people began to out-reproduce wealthier people, and the less intelligent out-reproduce the more intelligent; trends which would inevitably lead to disaster for the human race. Clearly, such concerns have not gone away. Despite a waning in the popularity of eugenics after the Second World War, research on the relationship between intelligence and fertility, for example, continued to be published in academic journals throughout the 20th century, often with at least a nod towards "dysgenic fertility". In the 21st century, "dysgenic fertility" is being more overtly discussed in academia, in line with a fully-fledged revival of eugenic ideology happening outside academia. Analysis by historian Quinn Slobodian suggests this revival has underpinned the rise in far-right political ideologies in many countries in recent decades. This paper will explore how the concept of "dysgenic fertility" has appeared in the pages of academic journals, with a particular focus on how this idea is re-emerging in the 21st century.

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