Fertility, Educational Attainment, and Social Class in Italy (Cohorts of 1917-1961). Is the Gap Narrowing?
Fecondità, istruzione e classe sociale in Italia (coorti 1917-1961).
Differenze ormai scomparse?

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1. Introduction

When studying completed fertility for Italian married women born between 1887 and 1916, Livi Bacci (1977) found relevant differences according to education and social class. Women from rural families had 1.5 children more than women whose husbands worked elsewhere. Moreover, among the same cohorts, the most educated women had about 2.5 children less than uneducated women.

Are these differences still relevant today? The social and cultural changes that have accompanied the diffusion of very low fertility in Italy over the last forty years may have lessened or even dissolved these differential patterns.

This paper endeavors to answer this question through an examination of the differences in the average number of children according to Italian married women’s level of education and their husband’s social class for cohorts 1917-1961. We elaborate individual level data from the Istat Multipurpose Surveys of Families and Social Subjects from the years 1983, 1998, and 2003 (Istat, 2006).

2. Education and fertility

The negative trend in fertility described by Livi Bacci (1977) continues without rest for all levels of education (Table 1). The average number of children for women with a high school diploma or a university degree falls well below replacement level.

The fertility of women with a primary level of education or none at all declines much more slowly, as similarly shown by Daguet (2000) for France, and Lappegård (2000) for Norway. The contribution of these women to overall fertility becomes negligible, however, among the younger cohorts.

The reduction of the difference between more and less educated women is initially slow, from +2.9 child per women for the 1887-91 cohort to +2.0 for the 1912-16 cohort, but then accelerates, descending to +0.5 for the 1957-61 cohort. Thus, if initially the decrease of overall fertility in Italy is greatly the resultant of a compositional effect, thanks to an increasingly large number of educated women, then very low fertility levels become more diffused.

Distinctions between women with different educational levels are also relevant at the regional level. While more educated women have fewer children across the country, there remains a persistent gap between northern and southern regions of Italy. Women
in the latter have higher fertility, not only among less educated women, but also for women holding a university degree. This gap begins to narrow with women born in the late 1950s but does not close, demonstrating the persistence of two very different reproductive patterns in Italy.

Table 1: Average number of children by education. Married women born in 1917-1961

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High school or more</th>
<th>Junior high school</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>No education</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>2.62</td>
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<tr>
<td>1922-1926</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>2.42</td>
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<td>1927-1931</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>3.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>1932-1936</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>2.45</td>
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<td>1937-1941</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.38</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2.04</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.94</td>
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<td>1947-1951</td>
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<td>2.16</td>
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<td>1952-1956</td>
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<td>1.96</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957-1961</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Social class and fertility

Our analysis is limited to the four decennial cohorts born between 1922-31 and 1952-61, using microdata from the above mentioned Istat Multipurpose surveys. Eleven different groups are built, according to husband’s occupational field and status.

Even if fertility decreases for all categories from the 1922-31 cohort to the 1952-61 cohort, differences between social classes, similar to those found by Livi Bacci (1977), remain significant.

White collar families have the lowest fertility, below replacement level since the 1942-51 cohort. Among these families, the average number of children is lowest among professionals, managers and executives, and highest among entrepreneurs, clerks and teachers. Craftsmen, shopkeepers, and industrial workers have intermediate fertility levels. Fertility is highest among families of farmers and agricultural workers (more than 2 children per woman, even for 1952-61 cohort).

Finally, differences between upper and lower class families are significant in each geographical area, while the southern regions have higher fertility for all social classes.

References