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A Journal of Demography
Volume 64, 2010 - [Issue 1](#)

995 | 66 | 13
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Subreplacement fertility in the West before the baby boom: Past and current perspectives

Jan Van Bavel

Pages 1-18 | Received 01 Oct 2008, Accepted 01 Aug 2009, Published online: 29 Dec 2009

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Abstract

Between 1920 and 1940, fertility dropped below replacement level in many Western countries. In today's scholarly literature, the drop is usually explained as a temporary reaction to the exceptional conditions of the inter-war period. This paper confronts that interpretation with the interpretations offered by scholars writing between the wars. According to leading demographers of the time, low fertility was due not to war or economic crisis, but rather to processes that now tend to be associated with the Second Demographic Transition, including secularization, individualization, rising consumerism, and women's emancipation. Since these were seen as structural features of modernization, most inter-war scholars argued that subreplacement fertility would remain an obstinate feature of modern society for an extended period of time.

Keywords:

below-replacement fertility

demographic transition

family planning

historical demography

reproduction

Europe

North America

Notes

1. Jan Van Bavel is at Interface Demography, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Pleinlaan 2, BE-1050 Brussels, Belgium. E-mail: Jan.VanBavel@vub.ac.be
2. I would like to thank the following colleagues for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper: Hans-Peter Kohler, Ron Lesthaeghe, David Reher, Tomáš Sobotka, Frans van Poppel, and Chris Wilson. I am also very thankful to the four anonymous reviewers for their exceptionally thorough reports and many good suggestions. This paper would not have been written without a grant from the Research Foundation of Flanders (FWO-Vlaanderen).

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