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Verzuiling ('pillarisation'), ontzuiling ('de-pillarisation') and fertility in the Netherlands (1920-1980)

Hans Knippenberg and Sjoerd de Vos

A deviant case

During a large part of the 20th century, the Netherlands have been a deviant case in the general (West-)European pattern of fertility decline. Starting in the last quarter of the 19th century, the decline of Dutch fertility slowed down from 1910/1920 onwards. In the same period, the regional differences in fertility within the Netherlands increased considerably: In 1931/1935, the southern provinces of North-Brabant and Limburg had the highest levels of marital fertility, which were 89 and 71 per cent higher than the province of North-Holland, which had the lowest level.

During the 1960^s and 1970^s the Netherlands lost its deviant demography as a consequence of a spectacular decline of fertility. It changed from one of the countries with the highest fertility levels into one with the lowest levels (Van de Kaa, 1987). The total fertility rate changed from 3.1 children per woman in 1960 to 1.6 in 1980. The geographical fertility pattern also showed a remarkable turn. At the end of the 1970^s the province of Limburg had the lowest level and also North-Brabant now was among the provinces with the lowest fertility levels.

Explanation

It will be clear that general theories on fertility decline cannot fully explain the deviant character of the Dutch fertility decline and its changing geographical pattern. These theories focus on (mainly economic and demographic) factors, which make birth-control attractive and (cultural) factors, which make birth-control also morally and psychologically acceptable (Wilson and Lesthaeghe, 1986 and Engelen and Hillebrand, 1986).

Religion is such a factor that potentially influences the acceptance of birth-control. Van Poppel (1974) showed that from the last quarter of the nineteenth century onwards, Roman-Catholics and orthodox Calvinists (*Gereformeerden*) had a higher marital fertility than other religious denominations and secular couples. That does not explain, however, why during a large part of the 20th century, the Netherlands had a higher fertility than for instance its southern neighbour Belgium, which was almost homogeneously Catholic. Van Poppel, therefore, pointed at the specific kind of *verzuiling* ('pillarization') of Dutch society, which was relatively strong. *Verzuiling* means the segmentation in Catholic, orthodox Calvinist, Socialist and Liberal subcultures and institutional networks.

The heyday of *verzuiling* started after the 1917 Constitution paved the road for general suffrage and equal financing of public and confessional primary education (Lijphart, 1968). Roman-Catholic and (orthodox) Protestant political parties strengthened their position in Parliament and the number of Catholic and Protestant primary schools increased considerably. However, none of the confessional 'pillars' had a majority position. That minority position made them sensitive for their numerical size, not only with regard to the more liberal and socialist parts of the population, but also to each other. In the European context, the Dutch

verzuiling was unique in the sense that there was a Calvinist pillar alongside a Roman-Catholic one, which both resisted birth-control to a greater or lesser extent. The consequence was a relatively high fertility of both pillars.

Analysis

Knippenberg and De Vos (2010a and 2010b) recently analysed the municipal differences in marital fertility at three time cuts: Around 1930, 1960 and 1978. The first two moments represent more or less the beginning and the end of the *verzuiling* of Dutch society. The last moment represents the *ontzuiling* ('de-pillarisation') of society after the cultural revolution of the 1960^s and 1970^s. This paper presents the main results of their multiple regression analyses.

In **1930**, by far the main explanatory factor was the rate of Roman-Catholic *verzuiling* measured by the proportion of votes for Roman-Catholics parties at the Second Chamber elections: the higher the rate of *verzuiling*, the higher the fertility. Almost half the variance (48%) in marital fertility was explained by only this factor. Infant mortality and Protestant *verzuiling* also had a stimulating impact on fertility. Economic modernization and prosperity had negative regression coefficients. All significant factors together explained 65 per cent of the variance in marital fertility.

In **1960** there were again strong positive effects of Roman Catholic (% KVP) and Protestant (% ARP, CHU, SGP) *verzuiling* on fertility. Also the proportion of farmers had a positive effect, which indicates an element of the traditional agrarian pattern of family bound agrarian ways of production. The proportion of high status occupations outside the agrarian sector had a negative impact on fertility. All significant factors together explained 69 per cent of the variance in marital fertility.

In **1978**, there was a significant change in the results of the regression analysis on marital fertility. Catholic *verzuiling* was no longer the main explanatory factor, but still had a positive impact on fertility. The strongest positive effect came from the proportion of SGP voters, which is the most orthodox Calvinist party. Also the proportions of votes for the other orthodox Calvinist parties (ARP and GPV) had independent positive effects on fertility. The proportion of the less orthodox Protestant party (CHU) no longer had a significant impact on fertility. Socio-economic status has a negative impact on fertility. Together, all significant factors explained 52 per cent of the municipal variance in marital fertility.

These changes have to do with the strong *ontzuiling* ('de-pillarisation') of the Roman Catholics in this period and a mixed development as far as the Protestant 'pillar' is concerned: *ontzuiling* of the least orthodox part and a kind of *herzuiling* ('re-pillarization') of some of the most orthodox parts resulting in two very orthodox 'mini-pillars' of *bevindelijk gereformeerden* (the rank and file of the SGP) and *vrijgemaakt gereformeerden* (the rank and file of the GPV) (Janse, 1985, pp. 161-163 and Stoffels, 1995, pp. 127-152). In Parliament, the Roman Catholic party almost halved from 32 to 18 per cent, so did the Protestant CHU (from 9 to 5%), whereas the other more orthodox Protestant parties remained more or less at the same level (around 9% ARP and 2.2% SGP) or even doubled (0.8 to 1.8% GPV).

The crumbling of the Roman Catholic 'pillar' becomes the more clear when we look at the results of a regression analysis on the change in marital fertility between 1960 and 1978. In this period the marital fertility dropped considerably from 171 to 90 children per 1.000 married women until 45 year. The municipal differences can be explained for 55 per cent by only one factor: The proportion of Roman Catholics in population (1960): The higher the proportion, the larger the decline of fertility.

Conclusion

The deviant character of the Dutch fertility decline between around 1920 and 1980 and its changing geographical pattern has almost entirely to do with the specific political-religious constellation of the *verzuiling* ('pillarisation') and *ontzuiling* ('de-pillarisation') of Dutch society. The two religious pillars (Roman Catholic and orthodox Protestant) were both in a minority position and had to compete not only with the liberal and socialist segments of Dutch society, but also with each other, which resulted in a relatively high fertility until the 1960^s. During the 1960^s and 1970^s Dutch society 'de-pillarised' as a consequence of a strong secularisation and the cultural revolution of de 1960^s. Consequently, Dutch fertility declined spectacularly. Only two 'mini-pillars' of orthodox Calvinists, the rank and file of the GPV (now merged in *Christen Unie*) and the SGP resisted and showed high fertility levels until the present day.

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