

## Why we don't have to believe without doubting

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### *David Coleman*

Every schoolboy used to know about the problem with the Holy Roman Empire: it was neither “Holy”, nor “Roman” nor even an “Empire”. Similar limitations may inhibit our wholehearted acceptance of the “Second Demographic Transition” concept in demography. In some important respects, this concept is not so much “second” but “secondary”, is not really “demographic” and cannot properly be described as a “transition” at all. Furthermore, while excellent in parts, the concept may be criticised as being in some ways statistically incoherent, to rest on an underlying theory that is by no means free of defects, and also to be over-stretched unreasonably to cover some phenomena better accounted for by other viewpoints.

That apart, the second demographic transition must be recognised as an excellent description, and partial analysis, of new lifestyle preferences which have become undoubtedly very salient in many modern societies over the last three decades or more. If the theory is correct, they may become as universal as anything can be. Second Demographic Transition theory is unusually scientifically valuable – and therefore vulnerable – because it connects the description of empirical phenomena with an underlying theory in a scientifically testable manner. In this respect it is superior to most interpretations of the “first” demographic transition theory. It is always easier merely to criticise than to be creative, and while attempting to draw attention to some limitations in the concept it is necessary first to pay homage to it and to its twin begetters, whose double fatherhood perhaps symbolises the new forms of family structure which their theory celebrates.

So let it be clear that the concept of the “Second demographic transition” is undoubtedly the theory of the decade, bidding fair to dominate demographic thinking at the beginning of the new century as the “first” demographic transition dominated that of the last. A theory that has launched a thousand research projects, it has been described as “the” mainstream concept among population scholars dealing with demographic change in European societies” (EAPS 2002 p. 3). Developed jointly by van de Kaa (1987) and Lesthaeghe (1987) as recently as 1986, it is an ambitious model. First it describes, and recognises as a “package”, or syndrome, the substantial and unprecedented progress of cohabitation, lone parenthood, childbearing outside marriage and low fertility observed in many countries since the 1960s and the parallel retreat in those societies from marriage and from traditional norms of sexual restraint. All these demographic trends have been consolidated during the 1990s (see Kiernan 2002, Heuveline et al. 2003) and as the theory predicts, are increasing almost everywhere in the developed world, although still at different levels of prevalence.

In essence the theory proposes that the new freedom of sexual behaviour, the diversity of forms of sexual partnership, and the relaxation of traditional norms and constraints observed in many developed societies since the 1960s, are intimately related and share common causes. They are held to be irreversible and likely to become universal. The new transition is made possible by parallel trends in further economic growth, intellectual emancipation through education and the concomitant ease of diffusion of ideas, especially reflected in the status of women. Its underlying theory, derived from the work of Maslow (1954) and Inglehart (1990), posits an emancipation from traditional deferential modes of behaviour once material needs and anxieties are mostly satisfied though the achievement of prosperity and, in Europe at least, the personal security offered by the welfare states which that prosperity sustains, with concomitant freedom for self-realisation and tolerance of that of others.

Numerous empirical studies in Western countries support the theory. At national level there is indeed a syndrome of “Second Demographic Transition” behaviour. Populations with a high prevalence of (for example) divorce also tend to have lower levels of marriage, higher prevalence of cohabitation and of births outside marriage, and abortion ratios, although the statistical association is not always very strong. The prevalence or even the possibility of such behaviour is of course modulated by national government policies on family welfare and on legal provisions for divorce and abortion, which are far from uniform (Tomka 2003). EVS, FFS, Eurobarometer and other surveys show that those populations, and individuals, who score higher on “post-materialist” responses are more likely to be engaged in unconventional living arrangements such as cohabitation (Lesthaeghe and Moors 1996) and to “do their own thing” in many other ways. Not surprisingly, therefore, the trend towards “post material” values and attitudes is presented by the votaries of the “second demographic transition” as an historically inevitable universal development of irresistible force.

However, the purpose of this debate contribution is not to praise the second demographic transition, nor even to bury it, but modestly to direct attention to some possible limitations.

### **Not “Second” but “Secondary”—only a partial regime change**

The SDT concept certainly documents a major development in behaviour. Indicators relating to sexual behaviour and living arrangements have been elevated to statistically unprecedented levels in European society, touching most of the people of the developed world to a greater or lesser degree: in the words of the song – “in Spain, the best upper sets do it ; even Lithuanians and Letts do it ...” Something is certainly happening. However, as Cliquet (1991) pointed out in a seminal critique, lots of other things have also happened to population, arguably of greater moment. The Upper Palaeolithic cultural revolution gave human population a much more assured mas-

tery over their environment and of their occupation of Ice-age Europe, the much later Neolithic revolution multiplied the 5 million or so inhabitants of the Earth at the end of the Palaeolithic over tenfold. It is assumed, though undocumented, that European populations in earlier centuries enjoyed in common with the rest of humanity a much more universal and early pattern of marriage than that revealed when the parish registers lift the curtain on marriage in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to show us the “Western European Marriage Pattern” already showing to full houses. If the new living arrangements comprise a “transition” then it is the fourth or fifth, not the “second.”

In some respects the new trends in behaviour represent a continuation of the “First Demographic Transition” or of its underlying forces, which it has followed closely in time, as indeed its progenitors state. The same kinds of cultural and ideational change that are held to propel the SDT are also adduced to account for the initial advent of family planning and low fertility norms in an increasingly literate society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the parallel or earlier advance of more rational and scientific thinking about health and disease. Individualisation has been a continuous process; the much-cited contrast between the reign of the “king-child” and the later domain of the “king-pair with a child” appears to lack substance in either sociology or in literature. A few parts of Europe, of course, pre-empted the SDT without instruction from demographic journals, for example in the relatively high levels of traditional cohabitation and extramarital births in Iceland, rural Sweden and Hungary in earlier centuries.

And Europe is no stranger to marital breakdown. It was only in the 1980s that the risk of breakdown of marriage in Britain, for example, finally exceeded the equivalent risk among the marriage cohorts of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Faced with unprecedented and possibly unendurable durations of marriage, a tendency divorce might simply be regarded as a restoration of the *status quo*; a functional substitute for death. Outside Europe it is not so easy to see how the SDT concept can be grafted on to demographic regimes that already incorporate some of its salient features. Divorce and easy re-marriage (for men) is traditional in some polygamous African societies, generally and traditionally in Islam and in traditional Japan, while cohabitation and extramarital birth were institutionalised in Latin American and the Caribbean, and to some extent among US blacks, for a century or more before the “first” demographic transition arose. But nowhere, it must be conceded, has the whole package been apparent before the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Not really “Demographic”

The next objection is that the Second Demographic Transition is not truly “demographic” in that it does not address the central issues of demography. It may be impossible to resolve what constitutes “demography”, but perhaps it could be agreed that its central concerns are with the biological phenomena of birth and death, the factors that determine their pattern and trend and thereby the structure, growth and

composition of populations with their various consequences. Such at any rate was the central theme of the “first” demographic transition which revolutionised all aspects of demographic regimes at the micro and the macro scale with the exception, in Europe, of marriage and household.

The second demographic transition concept, on the other hand, is more concerned with marriage and its alternatives; with sex, morals and living arrangements. While marriage is, of course, a proximate determinant of fertility, the contraceptive revolution that began in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century had at least partly uncoupled marriage from birth rates, thus reducing the relevance to central population phenomena of one of the most important subjects of “second demographic transition” behaviour. Sexual arrangements are just as much the business of sociologists as of demographers and relatively irrelevant to trends in birth rates. The concept has nothing to say about mortality or population growth, decline or ageing, unlike the “first” transition. Neither does the SDT concept have any connection with internal or international migration. The processes it describes are important and interesting enough without the need to elevate these very partial regime changes into a “transition” of the same rank as the “first”.

## **Not a “Transition”?**

A “transition” should be complete and irreversible, as the “first” one is held to be, not a transient cyclical change but a permanent movement, shared by most individuals in a population, between one long term sustainable demographic pattern and another.

But even in the “progressive” populations most enthusiastic for the Second Demographic Transition the relevant behaviour remains highly heterogeneous. Only in very few countries are more than half of all births outside marriage. Pre-marital cohabitation may indeed be nearly universal in Scandinavian populations but none has yet abandoned marriage. In most modern societies, most marriages are still ended by the death of one of the partners rather than by divorce. By contrast, the first demographic transition is complete: in the developed world family size is tightly clustered around an average of somewhat under two children, 90% of births survive to age 60, and barring migration the end of population growth has arrived.

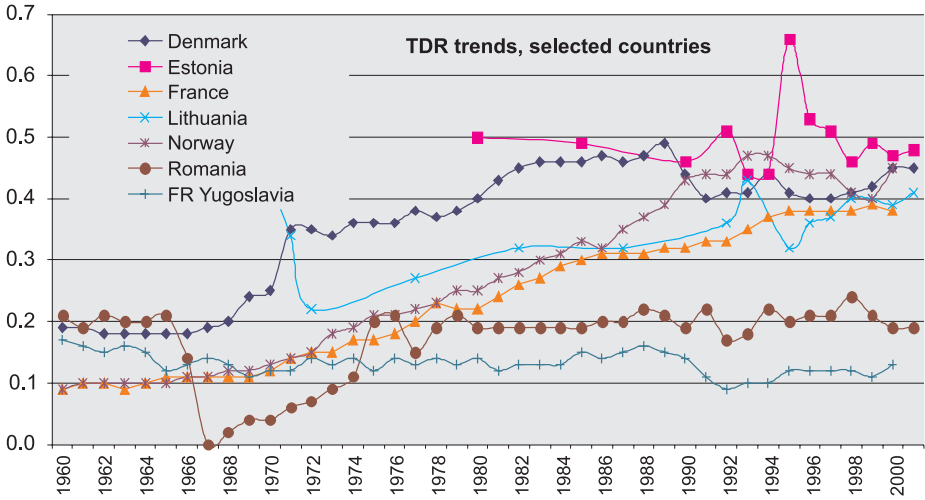
SDT behaviour is generally increasing even in those populations that have proved most resistant to change, in Southern Europe and Asia. But so far it remains a somewhat regionally limited phenomenon, still concentrated in its more developed form north of the Alps, though widespread in the English-speaking world overseas. Those Asian populations which have reduced vital rates in so spectacular a manner have so far shunned cohabitation and births outside marriage, even though early marriage may be in full retreat and some urban female populations are showing unprecedented tendencies to remain unmarried in Tokyo, Bangkok, Singapore and elsewhere. In some of those societies, high divorce rates were traditional. Advocates of the SDT

idea present this marked international diversity, for example in cohabitation and births outside marriage, in somewhat Hegelian fashion, as evidence of populations inexorably proceeding to a common destination, only at different speeds. They may be right, but this “transition” may stall half-complete, much as did an earlier Reformation which has made little progress beyond the Alps, or even beyond a line familiar since the Treaty of Wesphalia in 1648. Even at the 1987 census the religious composition of the two treaty towns remain distinct; with Protestants and Catholics about equally numerous in Osnabrück in Niedersachsen, while just across the border in Münster (Nordrhein-Westfalen) Catholics outnumber Protestant by about 3:1 (data from Henkel 2001 and pers comm.).

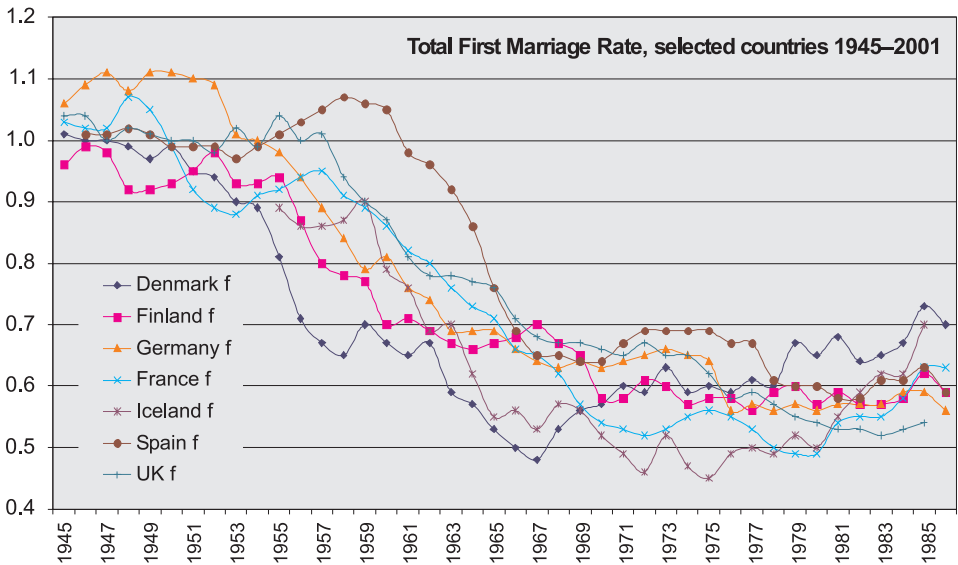
Some important populations in the Western world have remained notably resistant to it, particularly Asian immigrants and most of all Muslims. Arranged marriage with spouses from the countries of origin is prevalent in many of those immigrant populations. This is, in part, because even co-religionists who have been brought up in the “enlightened” and emancipated West are not considered to be suitable marriage partners lest they have imbibed some of the values under discussion here. In fact the younger generation of Muslims in Europe is showing signs of reverting to a more traditional Islam, demonstrated publicly through the wearing of headscarves and other outward signs of inward solidarity. That is not the way of the “Second Demographic Transition”.

Furthermore, for whatever reasons, by the end of the 1990s the secular trend in second demographic transition behaviour was faltering, or even declining in a few populations. There is no reason why divorce should not reach 100% of all marriages, or the total divorce rate exceed one. But the trend is not pointing in that direction. The end of the rapid acceleration of divorce in some countries (Figure 1) may be simply an unsurprising consequence of the smaller and more selective part of the population that has married in recent decades; a life table analysis is really needed. And the end of trend in the Balkan and former Soviet examples in the (very selected) group may be down to a calming down of post-communist turmoil, but its faltering in France, Denmark and Norway may be more interesting. We also have to account for the apparent increase in the popularity of marriage in some countries, where total first marriage rates have been going up (Figure 2). This may be a recuperation effect, however. Application of the Bongaarts-Feeney methods to total first marriage rates shows that delay in marriage accounts for the greater part of the apparent reduction in propensity to marry, for example in CEE countries in the middle 1990s. In Bulgaria, Hungary and the Czech and Slovak Republics, adjustment increases the TFMR from about 0.6 to about 0.8, although the final value for Bulgaria remains at a low level (Philipov 2003, pp. 108–109).

**Figure 1**  
Trends in total divorce rate



**Figure 2**



### Sustainable?

To be permanent, or at least long-term, transitions must, presumably, be sustainable. The underlying theory of the SDT posits radical ideational change made possible by economic progress. Are the ideational preferences for self-realisation, once

attained, irreversible irrespective of the standards of material security which made their realisation possible in the first place? And does their realisation have any feedback on it? Wealth emancipates populations from anxieties about material needs and, in Europe, supports the welfare states and social housing policies on which choices of living arrangements at least partly depend. But some of those welfare programmes have already been checked or reversed in Western societies from Sweden to New Zealand, as budget deficits have risen and electorates, at least for a while, rose against a regime of such high taxation. In some welfare regimes, high levels of divorce and lone parenthood may simply transfer some of the costs of the consumption of women and the production of children to the general taxpayer. That may not be affordable in the long run. In the UK for example, estimates of the cost of family breakdown have ranged from £4 billion p.a. to £10 billion p. a.. A more recent analysis by a pressure group, the Family Matters Institute (2000), estimated the direct costs to be £15 billion p.a., equivalent to about a third of public spending on education. In that country divorce creates three households for every two that existed before, and relationship breakdown is the biggest route out of owner-occupation into state subsidised “social” housing (Holmans et al. 1987). It may be that the high costs of lone parenthood are a particularly grim consequence of an especially pathological Anglo-Saxon pattern of living arrangements, with their high proportion of teenage births to girls without partners, married or unmarried.

Furthermore, lone parenthood tends to inflict psychosocial as well as material handicaps upon children brought up in fragmented or unconventional households, compared with those from intact families—specifically in respect of school performance, discipline and subsequent parenting (Kiernan 1992, Ermisch and Francesconi 2001a and b, Osborne et al. 2003). This, however, may again be a special feature peculiar to the circumstances of the UK and the US, where a higher proportion of children born outside marriage are brought up with only one parent than in Europe. More generally it may be asked whether modern economies can afford the long-term costs of the second demographic transition at the same time as the unavoidable and permanent drag on economic growth presented by population ageing.

### **A problem of coherence? The second demographic transition and low fertility.**

From its inception, the Second Demographic Transition concept was held to be intimately connected with the establishment of low fertility and in particular “lowest-low” fertility; that is with a TFR below 1.5 or below 1.3, according to taste. Therein lay much of the strictly demographic interest of the concept. There are two problems here. The first is that below-replacement fertility is not a new phenomenon, although the ultra-low levels of TFR in Southern and Eastern Europe are without precedent. Below-replacement fertility was first achieved in Western Europe in the 1930s and not just as a result of the economic depression—prosperous regions then had the low-

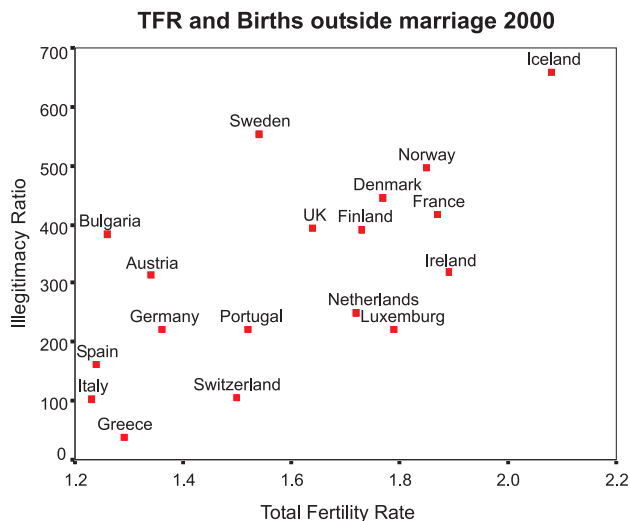


est, not the highest birth rates. In the 1930s, Net Reproduction Rates in Britain, France, Sweden, and New Zealand were the same as in 2000 or lower. US TFR in 1933 was identical to that in 2000 (2.14). The problem is, perhaps, that too many analyses start in the 1960s when data series from Eurostat and the Council of Europe so conveniently come on stream. The 1960s was the high point of the baby boom. A graph truncated at that period gives a false impression of an inexorable downward slide coinciding with the onset of the SDT, while in fact in most countries the real decline was forty years earlier. The 1950s and the 1960s are a deceptive aberration in fertility history.

Secondly, the second demographic transition manifestly has nothing to do with low fertility on a cross-national basis today. From a theoretical viewpoint, of course, few things could be more bound up with traditional concepts of duty and behaviour, or attended with more cost and inconvenience, than bearing and caring for children. It would be reasonable, indeed logically necessary given the underlying theory, for populations that score highest on post-material ideational responses and which manifest strongly the other SDT attributes, to have the lowest fertility as well; wisely avoiding opportunity costs of £250,000 and about 20 years of partial house arrest, so as to express their own individualities in greater freedom.

That is strikingly not the case. Neither the empirical nor the theoretical expectation is realised; quite the reverse. Comparing national populations, the relationship between the patterns and trends of period fertility levels and other “SDT” behaviour are exactly the reverse of what might have been expected (Figure 3). Populations most enthusiastic for non-traditional living arrangements within the developed world (NW Europe and English-speaking countries overseas) tend to have the highest fertility, where the lowest might be expected. Populations with very low fertility

**Figure 3**



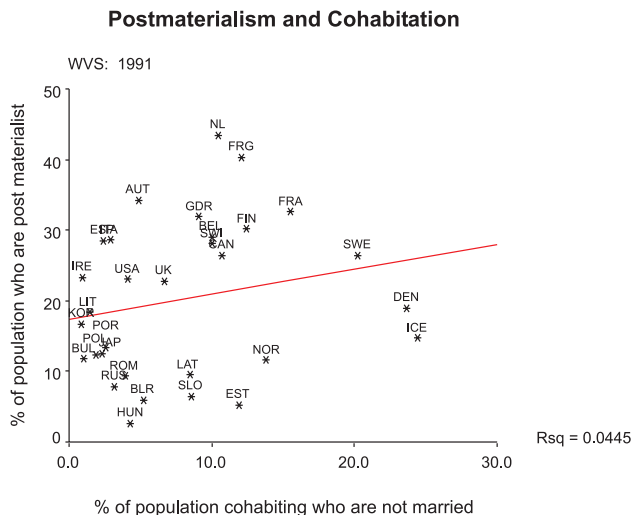


are typically those where traditional attitudes towards sexual relationships and living arrangements still persist. Thus all the countries of Southern Europe with the partial exception of Portugal, together with Germany, Japan, Korea, Singapore and other developed countries outside Europe, have low or lowest- low levels of divorce, cohabitation and illegitimacy while at the same time they have the lowest fertility rates in the world: (Bettio and Villa 1996). And it is not easy to see how SDT theory can account for the rise in the birth rate in a number of Western countries—notably France—or for Sweden’s roller-coaster birth rate.

## Problematic underlying theory

The SDT concept is admirably intellectually comprehensive in presenting a theoretical structure to account for the set of variables that it describes. But the Inglehart concept of “post-materialism” ideology underlying SDT theory is itself a weak theoretical foundation, despite its wide popularity in social science. Its critics find little difference between “materialism/post-materialism” and the conservative/liberal poles of personality (Degraaf and Evans 1996, Marshall 1997). The most frequently used short form of the questionnaire only poses four questions and has a weak test-retest consistency (the longer version does better: Heath, Evans and Martin 1994). The short form of the questionnaire does not touch upon one of the central issues of recent social and demographic change; gender equity and its symmetry inside and outside the home, clearly a powerful model of demographic change, especially in relation to low fertility (McDonald 2000). The statistical correlation between responses to the Inglehart scale and actual demographic behaviour of interest is often rather modest (see for example Figure 4).

Figure 4

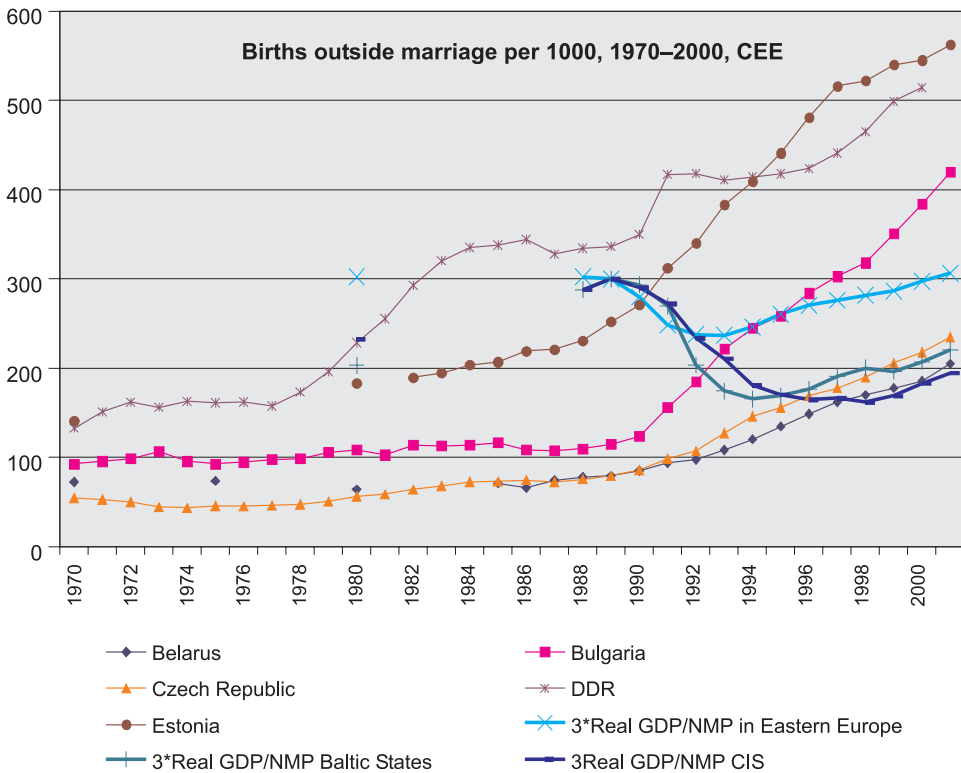


While its proponents are careful to emphasise that this model is not in essence in conflict with economic models of demographic change, it is often presented as such (by both sides). Economic and other models may well be more effective in accounting for trends. One example may be found in the former Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and in the European republics of the former Soviet Union, where a plurality of explanations may be needed to account for recent trends.

### **Is the CEE region really post-materialist?**

Cohabitation, divorce and births outside marriage had increased somewhat in many of these populations during the 1980s, before the collapse of communism, as part of a process of modernisation. A Second Demographic Transition explanation may be persuasive in accounting for trends among the more prosperous sections of those populations (Sobotka et al. 2003, Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2002). However it is difficult to see how that view can stand up in the face of the material realities after 1989 and 1991. Post-materialist sensibilities are supposed to be nurtured only by a secure material situation. Are we expected to believe that they could still flourish in the serious economic downturn, heightened unemployment and political insecurity of the post-communist period, where material standards of living fell by up to 40% in a few years? Indeed, until the late 1990s anyway, “post-materialist” attitudes were understandably much less developed in the CEE countries than in Western Europe (Inglehart and Baker 2000). Yet in some former communist countries births outside marriage and cohabitation increased very rapidly and marriage went into free fall in the midst of this economic turmoil and insecurity. The highly discontinuous rapid increase of births outside marriage in Bulgaria and Romania, after over two decades of negligible change, are particularly noteworthy (Figure 5). These populations were among the poorest of the CEE countries under communism, are still substantially rural and have so far failed to make effective economic or political transitions, remaining in a weak economic position (Åslund 2001). Despite this unpromising theoretical environment for SDT, their proportions of births outside marriage exceed those in more prosperous, more westernised countries in Central Europe. Another explanation is surely called for.

**Figure 5**  
CEE trends



This apparently “classical” SDT behaviour (e. g., high levels of births outside marriage) can hardly be due to individual empowerment but needs a quite different explanation. Instead, much of this early trend may be a social pathology, related to “anomie” and disorganisation especially among the poorer elements of a population distressed and unsettled by recent changes (Philipov 2001). Okolski (pers comm.) notes that the highest levels of births outside marriage in Poland are found in rural areas of West Poland where most agriculture had been collectivised and where the collectives had all become bankrupt in the early 1990s. However, the new difficulty of obtaining legal abortions in Poland may also be a factor. There, the populations were doubly detached from any conventional norms and restraints – once through the destruction of conventional village society (through collectivisation and transplantation from what is now Ukraine/ Belarus) and again when the collectives collapsed. Most of these births are to unmarried, poorly educated and non-cohabiting teenagers, not the target population of the enlightened, self-realising, secure concepts of the SDT. A not dissimilar pattern can be found among teenagers in the lower strata of Anglo-Saxon societies, where they are analysed under very different, and unsympathetic, ideological umbrellas (Murray 1990, Fukuyama 1999).

## Concluding comments

The SDT is a creative and valuable idea but may be mis-named. It is not a transition so much as a set of preferences, so far limited in time and space, of the more affluent population of some of the NW European and English-speaking countries overseas: a lifestyle choice perhaps only transiently sustained by welfare and high taxation. The age of entitlement may only temporarily have insulated people from the consequences of their actions and thereby only transiently permitted a wider spectrum of behaviour. These trends can progress or not, with little bearing on central demographic concerns, especially not on low fertility, which was claimed to be part of the SDT “syndrome”. The identification of “leader countries” which others follow has proved difficult; there does not seem to be one single trajectory. So far this “transition” has created diversity and divergence rather than convergence on a new pattern. It offers only one of several possible theoretical models for empirically similar behaviour, and the empirical demographic trends themselves are not the exclusive property of one theory.

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