Historical perspective on birth in Czech Republic – Interview with Kate?ina Lišková (1/2)

Description

Characterized by a rather low fertility rate, Czech Republic has known evolutions in its lifestyle for many decades that have undoubtably impacted the choice of parenting. But the way to apprehend statistics is not without consequences on the idea that one can have on birth in a country.



Associate Professor and Senior Researcher in Modern Transnational and Intellectual History at the Institute of History, Czech Academy of Sciences, currently affiliated as a guest researcher at Utrecht University, Kateřina Lišková focuses her research on gender, sexuality and health in Central and Eastern Europe in comparative and transnational perspectives. She accepted to answer *Regard sur l'Est*'s questions.

***Regard sur l'Est*: Could you bring a historical or sociological perspectives on general demographic issues that Czech Republic encounters, such as the raise of the rate of family households without children since 1991 when it was at its lowest point, the number of children per women lowering since the 1980s and the number of women having 4 or more children lowering without interruption since the 1950s?**

Kateřina Lišková: Czech lands have had a lower fertility rate for a long time. There were fewer children per woman than in other countries even before the State socialist policies came into place. By state socialist policies I mean universal healthcare for the mother and child and collectivized childcare from the beginning of the regime, legalized abortion from mid-1950s and, from the 1970s onwards, very generous family policies, various bonuses, housing availabilities and, ever so, slowly increasing number of spots in preschool facilities, specifically kindergartens.

But that did not accelerate the birthrate as the policy makers intended but kept it at barely reproduction rate. Then in the 1990s, the number of children born decreased. This tendency is generally attributed to the new opportunities that women in this generation had with education, work, travel which had not been available to their mothers.

Why the 1980s seems to constitute a breaking point in Czech Republic's demography as the number of children per women is lowering, statistics on marital status, birth outside marriage…?

I would put the break rather in the 1990s. Because the trend has been ever since the 1950s slowly but surely in decreasing the number of children. The early to mid-1970s is not affected by this trend for 2 reasons: One explanation is that the strong post-war birth cohorts were in their prime childbearing age and the other explanation is family policies. I am leaning towards pro-family policies as being the decisive factor then, because when I was going through the archival materials, I understood that experts expected already in the 1960s that there would be a baby boom as the strong post-war cohort became of reproductive age – but nothing happened. When demographers, conducted surveys in the late 1950s and early 1960s asking women how they managed their employment and parenting, they also asked under what circumstances would women consider having a third child. And women where very decisively saying: "Absolutely not 3 children. Under no circumstances a 3rd child. Two is already exhausting and impossible". And indeed, women were not having that 3rd child that the demographers wanted them to have to be surely on the population replacement side of the numbers.

In the 1970s, as a result of strong profamily policies people decided that, now, it might be a time to have that second (exceptionally even 3rd) child and having them maybe in a quicker succession they would have otherwise. So there was a spike in children born but that trend died out fairly quickly. And then, the trend continued downwards. It came to a head in the 1990s when those women who were born in the mid-1970s would be having children in the mid-1990s because their mothers had children when they were about the age of 20. These young women would have their first child in the 1990s but they did not: they were studying, they were traveling, they were postponing having children. During state socialism, women were having their first child around their 20th birthday and then the second relatively shortly thereafter; that trend was gone in the 1990s.

Many sociologists and demographers talk about this postponed motherhood as often unrealized motherhood, meaning that women postpone having children and have one child (instead of 2 or more, or none). So the 1990s are the changing point which is more pronounced, I think. Why would you put that in the 1980s?

Because of raw numbers. When compiling statistics, one would say that a change is occurring in the 1980s, even though it was more pronounced in the 1990s, most likely because of the collapse of the Socialist state and the split of Czechoslovakia.

If you look at it from a longer perspective, then you see that especially Czech women were having 2 (and sometimes even fewer) children long before the 1980s and they had them very early in their lives. And that held during the entire socialist period. So you can explain the drop in the number of births in the 1980s, for example, as a result of fewer women in the cohort of potential mothers.

But then a profound shift comes, implying changes in what people expect from their lives. If people, and especially women, start to expect other things than motherhood first and foremost then the trajectories really change. There are typically two kinds of reactions. On one hand, there are demographers and sociologists who argue that women will regret postponing their motherhood because then they will not have the desired number of children. On the other hand, there are other social scientists pointing out that there are other things in life and that women will enjoy, and will not become desperate for not having a child.

In any case, the ratio of women who forego motherhood completely in Czechia is now about 10% if you count only those at the end of their reproductive years. So, indeed women do have children later in life, but the vast majority of women does have children.

In your article of September 2023, you mentioned infant mortality and explained that this variable is hard to interpret in a historical perspective. Why is this variable so complex?

It is very important to realize that numbers are counted slightly differently in different countries at different points in time. That does not mean that these differences skew the overall picture of, say, developments in infant mortality in the postwar period, which we analyzed. However, there is a difference stemming from how you define who is liveborn and who is not liveborn because only those who are liveborn can then later die and enter infant mortality statistics.

The mid-20th century was a time in Europe when the infant mortality was high and began going down. And the decrease was fairly rapid. The infant mortality rates got reduced over a decade or so. The speed of decrease differs per country but when the numbers get down to a certain level, and thus the differences in infant mortality rates between countries are very small, then it very much depends who can even enter these statistics. What our team was first interested in was how did the countries of East Central Europe get these numbers down? What measures were taken in saving the children? How to make sure that children are born healthy and survive? When we were doing our research, we realized, indeed, that different countries used somewhat different definitions which come from their culture of what they consider life.

As a result, if you have a broader definition of what constitutes life at birth, you end up with somewhat higher infant mortality rate because then you have more children who are defined as liveborn and some of these vulnerable children die, which makes the statistics look worse for your country. But if you have a narrower definition of life, if you recognize

only one sign, for example, drawing a breath, then your infant mortality rate will likely be lower as fewer of those who “emerge to this world”, would be classified as liveborn and thus fewer can be then classified as having later died.

But none of that is to say that the medical doctors who were there did not try everything to save these babies. They were trying to resuscitate and put them in an incubator in order to save these children. In Czechoslovakia in the 1950s, if these efforts failed during the first 24 hours, such a case would not be necessarily defined as liveborn. This practice was not appreciated by other countries who applied a more embracing definition of life, as was the approach in East Germany at the time. Why should their statistics look somewhat worse than the Czechoslovak ones? Then, East Germans put pressure on Czechoslovakia to change their definition, which Czechoslovakia did in the mid-1960s.

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Link to the French version of the article

* Nathan HOURCADE is a translator and a Master graduate in History research from Université Paris Cité. His current research project focuses on energy security policies in the post-Soviet space through a comparative approach and history of mentalities. His previous work focused on Ukrainian foreign policy and nation-building by the end of the USSR. He led this interview as part of his internship at *Regard sur l’Est*.

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