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France: the highest fertility in Europe

Gilles Pison

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Population & Societies

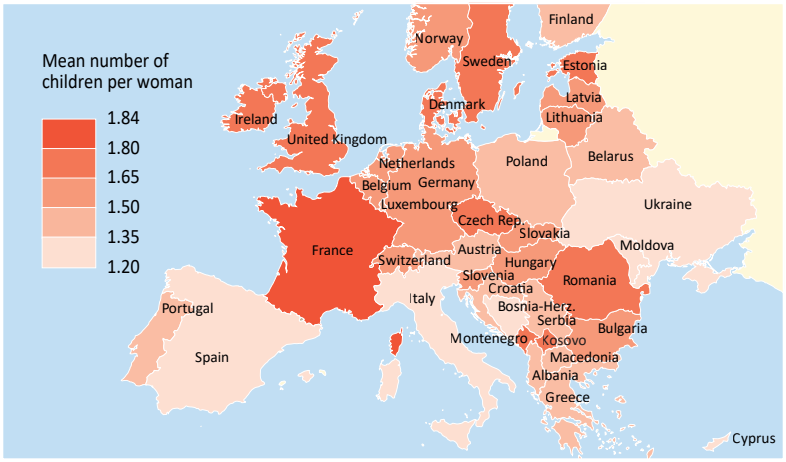
France has the highest fertility in Europe

Gilles Pison*

Fertility remained stable in France between 2018 and 2019, after having fallen from 2.02 children per woman in 2010 to 1.84 in 2018. Have similar fluctuations occurred elsewhere? Repositioning France's fertility level and trends among those observed in neighbouring countries, Gilles Pison describes the uniqueness of the French situation in Europe and in the world.

According to INSEE's latest demographic report, life expectancy in France continued to increase in 2019, and the total fertility rate (TFR) stabilized (see Box, the table on page 3, and [1]), remaining at 1.84 children per woman in metropolitan France, the same level as in 2018. This follows several years of decline, from 2.02 children per woman in 2010 to 1.84 in 2018, which reversed a rebound from a low of 1.66 in 1993. Have similar fluctuations from one period to the next been observed elsewhere? How does France compare with other European countries?

Figure 1. Variations in total fertility rate across Europe (2018)



Source: Eurostat.

G. Pison, *Population & Societies* no. 575, INED, March 2020.

High fertility in Northern Europe, low fertility in the South

Fertility is generally high in Northern Europe and low in the South (Figure 1 and [2]). France is an outlier in this North–South gradient, however. With Europe's highest fertility, it can be grouped with the Northern countries, although it lies in the centre of Western Europe.

This North–South divide was already visible 30 years ago, suggesting that deep-rooted mechanisms are at play rather than cyclical economic and social factors.

One explanation given by demographers is gender inequality; women have lower status in the South than in the North, and the gender division of tasks is more unequal [3]. Likewise, fewer policies have been set in place to favour female employment and work–life balance. Last, societies in Southern Europe consider that mothers should not leave their children to go out to work, at least in their early years. When a woman has a child, she may therefore have to quit her job. Women today, however, do not aspire to be homemakers like their mothers or grandmothers before them, and couples prefer to have two sources of income. This is true in Europe and throughout the

* French Museum of Natural History and French Institute for Demographic Studies.

world. For this reason, couples postpone the birth of a child if they are unable to reconcile work and family life. Some women even forego childbearing altogether.

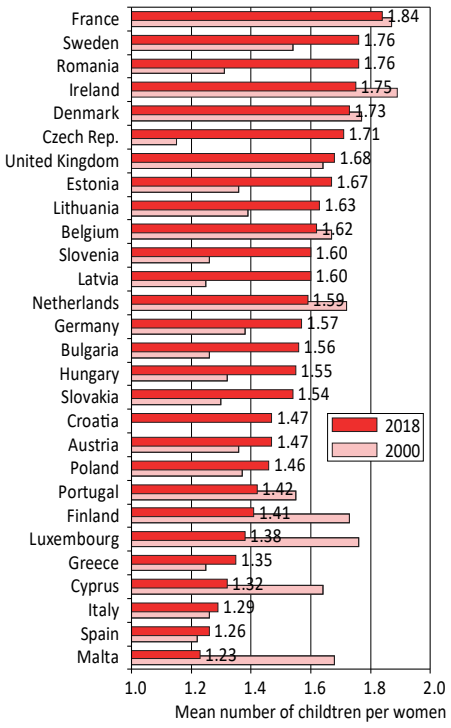
A dramatic fertility decline in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989...

The North–South gradient is observed in Western Europe—excepting France, as already mentioned—but also in the East, where it is less clear-cut, however. Fertility in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe has fluctuated considerably over the last 3 decades. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the social and economic upheavals that ensued, fertility plummeted. Ten years later, the TFR was still very low in most of these countries, as illustrated by the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania (1.15, 1.31, and 1.32 children per woman in 2000, respectively; Figures 2 and 3). Yet fertility in these countries was relatively high just before the collapse of communism, at 1.87, 1.82, and 2.22 children per woman in 1989. Women had their children at a relatively early age and received state benefits and childcare support that enabled them to remain in employment after childbirth [4]. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent transition to a market economy gave rise to a period of economic austerity (labour market deregulation, industrial restructuring, increased unemployment, widening income inequalities). State social policies were also cut back, with the withdrawal of support for long-term childcare, for example, and welfare benefits failed to keep up with inflation [4]. The younger generations also began to adopt Western values, giving new priority to personal fulfilment. The simultaneous action of these combined factors explains why the fertility rate declined very rapidly in all the former communist countries of Europe after the Iron Curtain was dismantled. It remained very low for a decade, reflecting the postponement of childbearing among young women who would formerly have been starting a family.

... but a recent rebound in the East

Fertility then started a timid rebound, but the increase was halted by the financial crisis of 2007–2008 [4]. A renewed upturn was observed in around 2012–2013, and the pace of increase has accelerated since then [2, 4]. For example, the TFR was 1.71 children per woman in the Czech Republic and 1.76 in Romania in 2018 (Figures 2 and 3). In many Eastern European countries, it looks as if the dip that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall is becoming a thing of the past. These countries are returning to the relatively high fertility levels recorded before the collapse of communism or at least catching up with the group of countries where fertility rates are moderate or high. Women in Eastern Europe now have their children much later than during the communist era. Some of the women who postponed childbearing during the difficult years have doubtless now made up for the delay. However, the cohorts of women of childbearing age during that period have far fewer children than the women of their mothers' generations.

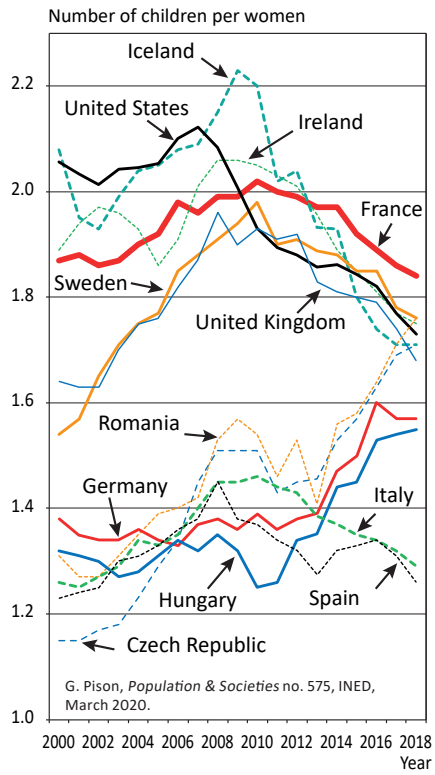
Figure 2. Total fertility rates of the 28 countries of the European Union in 2000 and 2018



G. Pison, *Population & Societies* no. 575, INED, March 2020.

Source: Eurostat.
Note: Countries are ranked in decreasing order of TFR in 2018 (indicated value).

Figure 3. Total fertility rate since 2000 in selected European countries and the United States



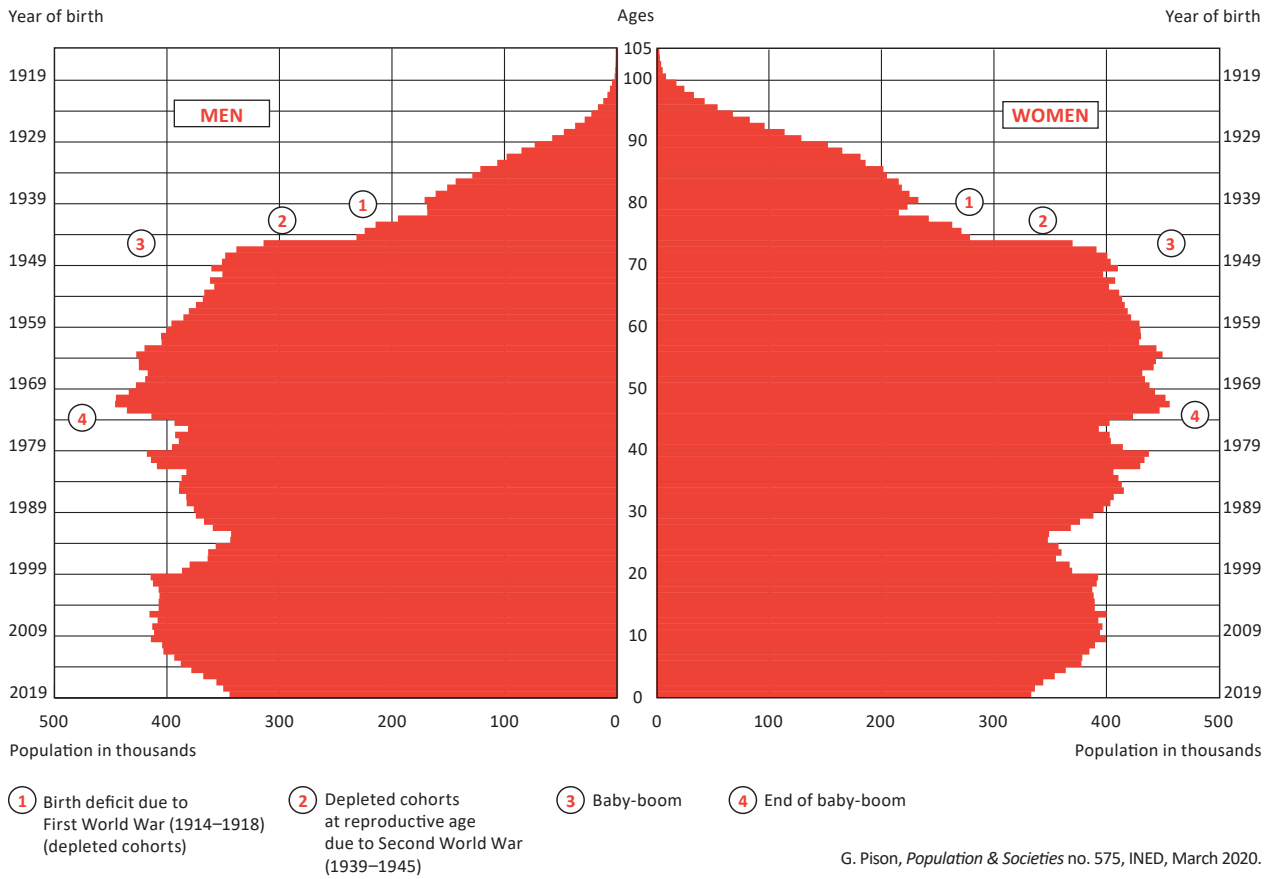
G. Pison, *Population & Societies* no. 575, INED, March 2020.

Sources: Eurostat and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A fluctuating fertility rate in Northern Europe too

In the countries of Northern Europe, where fertility has remained relatively high over the last 30 years, the TFR has also varied, though less widely than in the East,

France has the highest fertility in Europe



G. Pison, *Population & Societies* no. 575, INED, March 2020.

Table. Demographic indicators 1950 to 2019, metropolitan France

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017(p)	2018(p)	2019(p)
Births (m)	862	820	850	800	762	775	802	790	782	781	760	745	730	720	714
Deaths (m)	534	521	542	547	526	531	540	559	558	547	582	581	594	597	599
Natural increase (m)	328	299	308	253	236	244	262	231	223	234	179	164	137	123	115
Net migration (m)	35	140	180	44	80	70	43	91	107	39	53	88	60	60	60
Total growth (m)	363	439	488	297	316	314	305	322	331	273	230	230	215	189	181
Adjustment (1) (m)	—	—	—	—	– 53	94	—	—	—	—	– 63	– 81	– 98	– 99	– 99
Birth rate (t)	20.6	17.9	16.7	14.9	13.4	13.1	12.8	12.4	12.2	12.2	11.8	11.5	11.3	11.1	11.0
Death rate (t)	12.8	11.4	10.7	10.2	9.3	9.0	8.6	8.8	8.7	8.5	9.0	9.0	9.2	9.2	9.2
Infant mortality rate (r)	52.0	27.4	18.2	10.0	7.3	4.4	3.5	3.3	3.5	3.3	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.6	3.6
Total fertility rate (e)	2.95	2.74	2.48	1.94	1.78	1.87	2.02	1.99	1.97	1.97	1.92	1.89	1.86	1.84	1.84
Life expectancy:															
Males (a)	63.4	67.0	68.4	70.2	72.7	75.3	78.0	78.5	78.8	79.3	79.0	79.3	79.5	79.6	79.8
Females (a)	69.2	73.6	75.9	78.4	81.0	82.8	84.7	84.8	85.0	85.4	85.1	85.3	85.4	85.5	85.7
Marriages (2) (m)	331	320	394	334	287	298	245	240	233	235	230	227	228	228	221
Marriage rate (t)	7.9	7.0	7.8	6.2	5.1	5.0	3.9	3.8	3.6	3.7	3.6	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.4
Population (3) (m)	42,010	45,904	51,016	54,029	56,841	59,267	63,070	63,698	64,028	64,301	64,469	64,639	64,738	64,822	64,898
Under 20 (2) (m)	12,710	14,991	16,772	16,380	15,605	15,068	15,440	15,513	15,589	15,652	15,646	15,616	15,562	15,479	15,390
65 and over (2) (m)	4,796	5,347	6,598	7,466	8,039	9,561	10,667	11,302	11,649	11,989	12,311	12,620	12,910	13,179	13,453
Under 20 (2) %	30.3	32.7	32.9	30.3	27.5	25.4	24.5	24.4	24.3	24.3	24.3	24.2	24.0	23.9	23.7
65 and over (2) %	11.4	11.6	12.9	13.8	14.1	16.1	16.9	17.7	18.2	18.6	19.1	19.5	19.9	20.3	20.7

(a) years – (e) children per woman – (m) in thousands – (p) provisional – (r) per 1,000 live births – (t) per 1,000 population.
(1) Population estimates for the years 1990 and 2000 and for the years 2015–2019 were adjusted to establish accounting consistency between the 1990, 1999, and 2006 censuses (for 1990 and 2000) and between the censuses of 2014 and the following years for the years 2015–2019 (see Beaumel and Papon, 2020 [1]).
(2) Including same-sex marriages from 2013.
(3) At year-end.
Source: INSEE, Division des enquêtes et études démographiques (http://www.insee.fr).

Box. Demographic situation of France in 2019

The population of France on 1 January 2020 was an estimated 67.1 million, of which 64.9 million in metropolitan France (mainland France and Corsica) and 2.2 million in the overseas departments and regions [1]. In metropolitan France, the population grew by 175,000 in 2019 (+0.3%). Two-thirds of this increase was attributable to a surplus of births over deaths and one-third to net migration, i.e. the difference between migration inflows and outflows, estimated by INSEE at 60,000.

Almost as many births in 2019 as in 2018

The TFR remained stable between 2018 and 2019, at 1.84 children per woman. The number of women of reproductive age fell slightly, and this explains the small decrease in births from 720,000 in 2018 to 714,000 in 2019.

The trend towards later childbearing observed over the last 4 decades is continuing, and the mean age of women who gave birth in 2019 was 30.8 years. Mean age at childbirth has increased steadily since 1977, when it stood at 26.5 years.

An examination of cohort fertility shows that women born in 1969, who reached age 50 in 2019 and have completed their reproductive life, had 2.00 children on average. Women born in 1979, who turned 40 in 2019, have already had 2.01 children. By the time they are 50, the total should reach at least 2.05, a clear increase with respect to the 1969 cohort. For the younger cohorts who still have many childbearing years ahead of them, it is risky to predict their completed fertility, although it may well remain above 2.00 children per woman.

with an upturn in the early 2000s followed by a trend reversal and then a decline from 2008 (Figure 3). The relatively low TFR in the 1990s was due to birth postponement: the older cohorts of women had already completed their childbearing, whereas the younger cohorts were delaying family formation until later ages. This resulted in relatively low birth numbers in those years. The trend towards later childbearing slowed down in the early 2000s, leading to a rise in births and in the TFR. The increase was halted by the 2007–2008 financial crisis, when the economic recession and high unemployment made the future more uncertain. Consequently, some couples postponed their childbearing plans in the hope that things would improve. This revived the trend towards later births, and the TFR resumed its decline. But this pattern continued even after the crisis was over, signalling the possible emergence of a new trend not linked to the economic situation.

***

For France, the decrease in the TFR in recent years should be placed in perspective. In the United States, between the start of the crisis in 2007 and 2018, the TFR fell by 23%, from 2.12 children per woman to just 1.73 (Figure 3). In the United Kingdom, it fell from 1.96 in 2008 to 1.68 in 2018, a drop of 17%. While France is no exception, the decrease has been much smaller (less than 8% between 2008 and 2018) and began later as the effects of the economic recession hit the country more slowly. Despite the recent downturn, the French TFR was still the highest in Europe in 2018, and recent fluctuations have been less abrupt than elsewhere (Figures 2 and 3). The shock of the crisis and the effects of unemployment were probably dampened by generous social and family policies.

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Abstract

Fertility is generally high in Northern Europe and low in the South. In the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, it plummeted after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 but has quickly risen over the last few years.

Keywords

fertility, age at childbearing, France, financial crisis, family policies, European comparisons

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