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'Culture and the historical fertility transition'

The historical transition to a low fertility regime was central for long-run growth, but what caused it? Existing explanations largely focus on the economic incentives to have children. This paper provides evidence that, in addition to the influence of economic incentives highlighted by most existing work, cultural forces were an important and complementary driver, influencing the timing and speed of the historical fertility transition. We focus on the fertility transition in Britain and among British-origin populations living elsewhere. Britain is interesting not only because it was the first industrial economy, but also because it exhibited a sharp change in fertility in 1877.

The first half of the paper documents large synchronized declines in fertility among culturally-British households residing outside of Britain, in Canada, the U.S. and South Africa, relative to their non-British neighbors. By comparing fertility patterns in British-origin households to non British-origin households living in the same location, before and after the trial, we are able to rule out traditional economic drivers.

The second half of the paper proposes a plausible catalyst for the change: the famous Bradlaugh-Besant trial of 1877. To provide more direct evidence that the trial had a meaningful effect on fertility, we focus on England and Wales, where we are able to take advantage of a uniquely rich database of newspaper articles in order to identify locations that were more or less exposed to news about the trial. Difference-in-differences results indicate that fertility declined more rapidly after 1877 in locations with greater newspaper coverage of the trial. The results are robust to including a rich set of variables reflecting factors commonly thought to have played a role in the historical fertility transition as well as controls for pre-existing newspaper exposure. This evidence tells us that the Bradlaugh-Besant trial provides a plausible explanation for the large fertility reductions among culturally-British populations documented in our main analysis.