

# Notes on the fall of fertility in Russia

Ali Kadri<sup>1</sup>  
MEI/NUS

## Abstract

This essay investigates the fall of fertility in Post-Soviet Russia. The findings are that it is not the contribution of any single or group of socio-economic variables, which accounts for the fall of fertility rates in Russia during the transition. It is rather the precipitous collapse of accumulation as a totality dragging down with it all social support platforms that assisted the expansion of the family in modern industrial societies, which explains the sudden fall. Pursuant to the demise of the Soviet Union, all the social, economic, and demographic variables dropped simultaneously and instantaneously. The fertility rate fell to levels only experienced during the Great War. Based on this empirical analogy, I constituted this to be evidence that the transition from a planned soviet style economy to a neoliberal market driven economy, at least in respect to reproductive behaviour and population growth, appears to bear a similar impact to that of a war on a population. Moreover, the structural shift of the Russian economy towards dependence on oil and gas rents, which are labour saving, have revamped state policy vis-à-vis population growth toward a position that favours a smaller population. The continued absence of social support mechanisms for family expansion implies that the state is attempting to avert any future growth in the labour force. With erratic oil rent and paucity of jobs expansion, Russian fertility rates are poised to remain significantly below replacement levels unless, of course, the economy re-industrialises or (inclusive or) labour assumes its fair share in participating and shaping the political process.

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<sup>1</sup> [meiak@nus.edu.sg](mailto:meiak@nus.edu.sg).

Pursuant to the fall of the Soviet Union, the fragmented social formations left behind were in tatters and, to make matters worse, right from the very start they were subjected to neoliberal shock therapy aimed at deconstructing what remained of their social welfare nets. Social programs meant to support the expansion of the family and, which had already sustained heavy erosion in the absence of democracy-for-the-working-class under Soviet style socialism, were particularly hard hit. From the very outset of the transition however, the more industrialised central and eastern European economies experienced a sharp and sustained drop in the total fertility rate only comparable in its severity to figures recorded earlier in war-time conditions.<sup>2</sup> In some of these countries, fertility rates recovered, but never to pre-transition or replacement levels. In Russia, particularly, the recovery of the fertility rate, remained sluggish and far below the population replacement level.<sup>3</sup> Russia's population, consequently, swung into an uncertain path of decline. In this essay, I will situate the reasons behind this phenomenon, arguing that its causes are not to be found in some regression analysis that allots different weights to putative 'explanatory variables,' but in a sudden breakdown of the process of accumulation as a whole as a result of Soviet defeat in the cold war and, the neoliberal onslaught on social institutions, which support human reproduction.<sup>4</sup>

The continued enfeebling of family-support social programs is related to Russia's dependence on rents accrued from natural resources- oil and gas, which are by their very nature capital intensive and labour saving. This structural shift in the Russian economy from planned industrialisation to rent has led to a process of state-sponsored birth aversion. So long as accumulation proceeds on the basis of oil and gas rents or earning without productive effort, the Russian state will not need to invest in labour and, hence, it will never seriously attempt to redress the issue of a persistently low fertility rates.<sup>5</sup> The fact that only inadequate resources continue to be allotted to social programmes, also implies that there has been a deepening of the process of commoditisation of labour, or, more concretely, a fusing together of people with what people do to survive. It is not that any commodity is standing above labour and dictating the allocation of resources, it is labour power, which intrinsic to man, which now stands above people and rules their lives. For Meillassoux, this is a process of complete alienation.<sup>6</sup> In the early stages of the transition (1990-1995) there were '1.36 to 1.57 million premature deaths, with approximately 70 percent occurring amongst men.'<sup>7</sup> During the years of Yeltsin's 'first presidency' population declined by 3.4 million people, which is higher than population decline during the Russian civil war of 1918 to 1920 and which was about 2.8 million people.<sup>8</sup> Capital, which is a social relationship mediated by the state, continues to prevent birth to a degree that tallies with the demands of its own accumulation.

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<sup>2</sup> On average, for the period 1990-1999, the total fertility rate fell far below replacement levels to about 1.2 per woman. MONEE database, UNICEF, 2001. War fertility varied tremendously, but on average, war figures are near the transition ones. See United Nations-Economic Commission for Europe Survey, Fall 2000.

<sup>3</sup> The latest available figures of fertility rates are available from the World Bank, WDI, situate the total fertility rate at around 1.5 children. [http://www.google.com/publicdata?ds=wb-wdi&met=sp\\_dyn\\_tfrt\\_in&idim=country:RUS&dl=en&hl=en&q=fertility+rates+ruusia](http://www.google.com/publicdata?ds=wb-wdi&met=sp_dyn_tfrt_in&idim=country:RUS&dl=en&hl=en&q=fertility+rates+ruusia)

<sup>4</sup> For detailed data coverage, refer to the United Nations-ECE Survey, Chapter 6. [http://www.unece.org/ead/pub/001/001\\_6.pdf](http://www.unece.org/ead/pub/001/001_6.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> The total fertility rate remained at 1.5 children per couple, whereas replacement requires that the rate be closer to 2.1 children.

<sup>6</sup> Meillassoux Claude, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community*, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

<sup>7</sup> N. Bennet et al, 'Demographic Implications of the Russian Mortality Crisis,' *World Development* 26.11 1998, : p. 1921

<sup>8</sup> Boris Kagarlitskii, *Russia under Yeltsin and Putin: Neoliberal Autocracy*, Pluto Press, 2000, p. 3.

## 1. A SHORT NOTE ON THE BACKGROUND DEBATE

The debate on the causes of the decline in Russian fertility rates oscillates between an emphasis on social or cultural values spurred by the newly adopted western style democratisation and the steep fall in economic conditions experienced in a drawn-out transition.<sup>9</sup> In times of relative stability, the search for the variables that explain gradual changes in fertility rates appear to be straightforward. In a given context and in a specific period of time, a set of customary socio-economic variables exhibits linear or non-linear relationships with the fertility rate and, subsequently, demographic change. In one rather generic instance, it is maintained, as is often the case in empirical literature, that fertility should be gauged as a function of biology, time, money, ideas, and security (Hobcraft and Kiernan, 1989).<sup>10</sup> More broadly, human fertility is construed as a function of each element of the totality of living condition by differing significance, *qua* statistical significance. Thus, there is not a cohesive theory of human reproduction; there are theories or, because of the innumerability of social variables that could explain fertility, an endless number of theories that are conditioning human reproduction. In this overly empiricist fashion, the genesis and interrelatedness of social variables constituting a whole whose dynamic obeys the diktat of capital accumulation will not be questioned. The method delves into the part and overlooks the whole, which is capital, or the principal social relationship under capitalism that is never put in doubt. It will purposely and mistakenly emphasise the “relative-ness” of these social variables *cum* factors, all the while, overlooking the primacy of the broader more determining variable, which is the social nature of capital accumulation and its attendant labour process in a given historical period.

Fertility varies, not because of different statistical percentages assigned to manifest social or economic variables, but because a change in one seminal social relationship under historically determined conditions, which is capital and its associated rate of capital accumulation, sets off a sequence of events that become encoded in human behaviour and effect the fertility rate. At best, a formalized or empirical assessment, which tests different variables for their contribution to fertility, generates the weight of arguments in a logical proposition assumed under a one-sided statistical/causal framework.<sup>11</sup> The search for the reasons of changes in fertility are, under more plausible assumptions, tracked subject to the emergence of labour demand, including the making of new labourers, in relation to the accumulation of capital and the distribution of wealth in a given society (S. Coontz, 1957).<sup>12</sup> But Coontz frames the issue in an banal manner, without referring to labour demand as the labour process under capitalism, which is instituted by coercion and repression; in view of the fact, that the free labourer does not own the tools of his or her labour and would, in the absence of non-market forms of livelihood support, tend to perish. Population growth and, its constituting component, which is the fertility rate, remain historically conditioned phenomena and, in a subordinate fashion, subject to the concrete shape of the coercion attendant on the labour process and the dynamic of capital accumulation and, in a concomitant fashion, the way capital regulates the rules governing the reproduction of man.

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<sup>9</sup> See the proceedings of the European Population Conference, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Hobcraft John and Kiernan Kathleen, ‘Becoming a parent in Europe,’ Evolution Revolution in European Population, European Population Conference, FrancoAngeli, Milano 1995.

<sup>11</sup> This is being said in respect to the fallacy of regression, which represents the quantitative tool employed in such type of research.

<sup>12</sup> Coontz, Sydney H. 1957, Population Theory and the Economic Interpretation, London, Routledge and Keegan Paul.

The task of assessing fertility rates in any period would be appropriately handled by examining the theoretical underpinnings, which were produced in the past, qualified by phenomena arising in the present. In empirical studies of fertility behaviour, however, the spurious effects of closely interlocked social and biological variables demonstrate that sub-components of a given social reality tend to move in tandem with the broader more encompassing relationship governing their behaviour. Thus if the broader category of national income is halved precipitously, as was the case in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, then all the social indicators, would accordingly suffer a setback. Running a million-regression or sifting through many socio-economic variables to find explanatory determinants of fertility provides a point of reference in time about the principal policy variables available to us, however, it is neither theory nor should it form the basis of policy. The trigger of fertility behaviour is not couched in one or several variables; it is the totality of a social process, which is principally self-determining and, distinctively, not the sum of several variables or components. Statistical techniques lead to wholesale measures and, often, bias theoretical construction by placing the accent on the rationality of individual or behavioural response to changes in specific social variables. Individual fertility behaviour responds to pre-existing historical conditions, which are defined by them and, circularly, mould their dispositions, in respect to reproductive behaviour. The breadth and complexity of the empirical task, especially, in the case of Russia requires both modesty and transparency, especially if one were to explain the steep and massive social failure of transition-Russia and its associated fall in fertility rates. It may be all too unambiguous to state that the disengagement of national capital assets during the transition, the fall in labour demand and deteriorating living standards compress social time and encapsulate a drawn-out historical process into a very short chronological period, hence, devastating human reproduction in the very same way that a war does. But this does not cover the nature of the capitalist social relationships that have led to debasing and commodifying human life, which is what it took to thwart reproductive behaviour and fertility.

In more mature conventional explanations, abstaining from physical human reproduction has been described as a form of revolt against deteriorating social conditions (Titmuss and Titmuss, 1984).<sup>13</sup> In other overly vacuous accounting of fertility, individuals in more advanced formations are said to conduct a cost-benefit analysis as to whether they can feed, clothes or educate their children (Becker, 1995). However, recurrent observations from events reaffirm that changes in reproductive behaviour are never static enough to be explained by the same set of variables or under rigid assumptions. If anything, the observable and immediate causes of fertility appear to be constantly changing or concretely determined. In the case of Russia, the fall in the fertility rate can be taken to represent revolt against failing social conditions, which has assumed the form of abstention from human reproduction, but it is far too obscure to find out how the inner psyche of society responded to the collapse of the old soviet order. For all one knows, it is *only after* a detrimental state of dismal economic collapse caused by shocking neoliberal policies, that fertility rates plummeted to war-like levels. Behavioural and fertility responses occur after major changes to the overall context of social and economic reproduction takes place. Choices, ipso facto, were made, but the platform and boundaries for individual or collective decision-making were construed after history shifted society from one soviet-style position to fully-fledged capitalist.

In the economic transition experienced by Russia, the very degree of economic downfall and hardship predetermines all events, so much so, that no emerging phenomenon, particularly, could be explained outside of the growing crisis of capital. In the severe downturn of the transition, economic and cultural causes of demographic change became difficult to distinguish analytically

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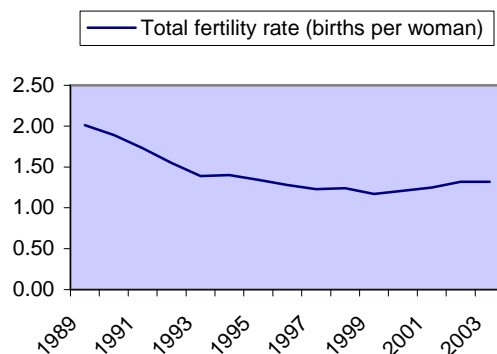
<sup>13</sup> Titmuss Kathleen and Titmuss Richard, *Parents Revolt, a Study of the declining birth rate in Acquisitive Societies*, London, Secker and warbung, 1984.

from one another and collided into each other, the usual time lags separating statistical cause and effect disappeared, and the two areas bore an instant and indistinguishable impact on human reproduction. If one were to judge by the sharp and immediate fall in fertility rate, the rising suicide and abjection rates, then, it may safe to say that the speed at which social change occurred under neoliberal shock therapy, says that capital was conducting a vendetta on anything ‘social’ lingering in the midst of what used to a highly socialised formation.

## 2. An empirical background

In Russia, all the major social and economic variables exhibited a downward trend and or a stylised co-movement with the fertility rate. Output, employment, social programs, in a word, all the elements of support for making human lives in advanced industrial societies were impinged upon (UNICEF, 1999).<sup>14</sup> Vulnerable social groups within the working class were most exposed to the wrath of neoliberal shock therapy. The increasing number of women in poverty led UNICEF to assess matters as "the feminisations of poverty in the transition." (UNICEF, Women in Transition).<sup>15</sup> By an over-determination of coinciding and immediate reasons: cultural, political, and foremost market liberalization and collapse, a society's physical ability to reproduce itself was stunted. The pervasiveness of contraceptive methods, including a tolerance of abortion on demand, which had risen significantly in the early years of the transition, indicated that the fall in fertility rates were premeditated at the level of each individual case. The decision to abstain or limit a family's expansion were a reflex-like response to volatile market and crisis conditions and the insecurity that has now come to plague the lives of people.

The fall in the fertility rate was not an exception. Employment fell, income inequality widened and, the destruction of social programmes was carried under the pretext that socialism was a parasitic model. The magnitude of the crisis and the speed at which human reproductive behaviour responded to the transition mimicked the adjustments previously observed in war-time conditions.



The observable social and economic statistics of Russia's transition to a neoliberal economy were about freefall as distinct from gradual decline (See selected graphical representations below). Russia's income in 1999 was at about half the level of 1989. Major determinants of the economic environment, employment, poverty and widening income differences, which are the standard shapers of fertility and distinct characteristics of the neoliberal

<sup>14</sup> The MONEE Project, UNICEF.

<sup>15</sup> Women in Transition, The MONEE Project, CEE/CIS/Baltics- UNICEF, No.-1999.

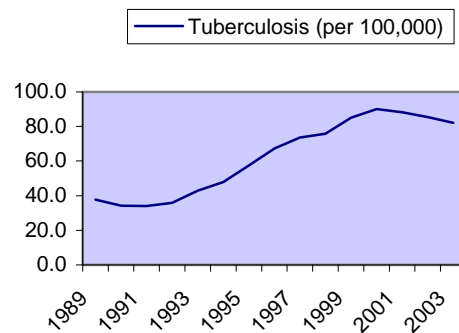
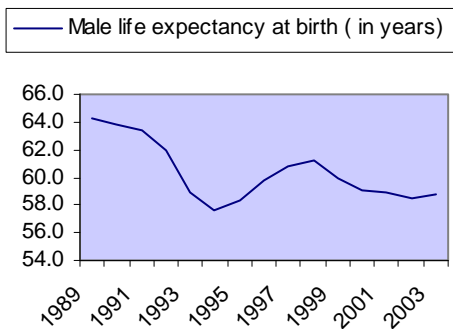
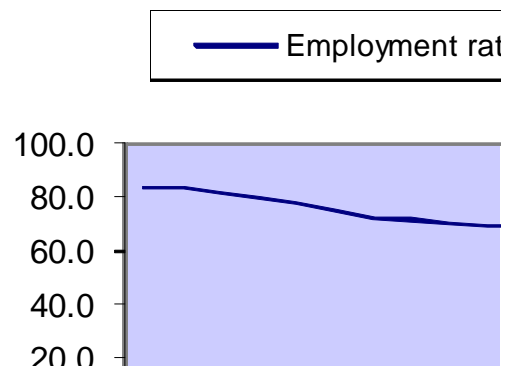
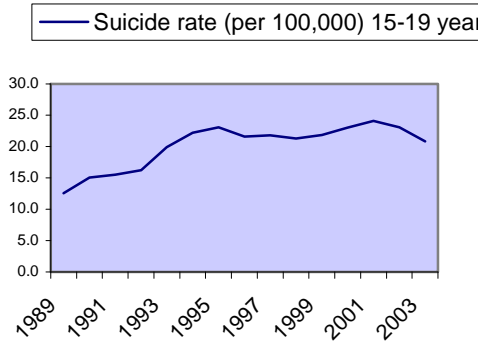
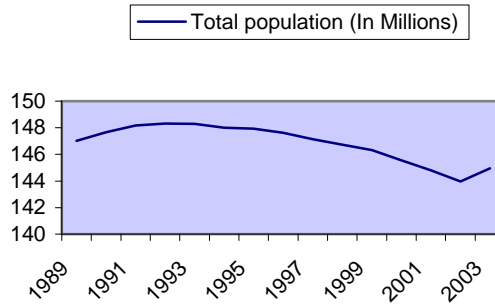
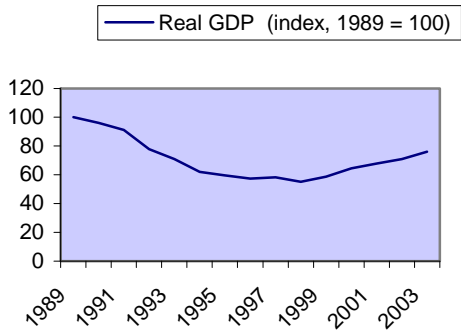
transition, displayed a co-movement with the fertility rate, without the customary lags that would determine fertility under steady conditions. Although, these measures may have slightly recovered with the rise of oil prices and the buoyant recent economic performance of Russia, they never attained their past levels. Oil/gas rents, which are labour saving and unsteady as compared to the steadiness that is attendant on rising productivity, have come to characterise Russian development. Oil revenues rank high in terms of wide deviations over time.<sup>16</sup> Improvements to living conditions after the rise in oil revenues may recede if oil prices tumble.

However, even under the more recent buoyant economic performance, fertility failed to regain its past rate. It remained at 1.5 children per couple, whereas replacement requires that the rate be closer to 2.1 children. State funded family assistance and benefits to parents with children were not fully restored. The transition is characterised by shrinkage of the public sector, broad social dislocation, and a retrenchment of social programs intended to offer incentives for reproduction. The failure to adequately monetise child bearing by redistribution and the risks related to the vagaries of the market continue to influence the reproductive behaviour of the Russian family. A corollary to this process resurfaces in view of the persistently weak demand for labour in Russia as a result of oil rent dependency. The stronger hold of the rent nomenclature on Russian development implies that the fertility rate is likely to remain below replacement until another more labour intensive course takes hold.

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/dp\\_159.en.pdf](http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/dp_159.en.pdf), Dynamic Products in World Exports, Jörg Mayer, Arunas Butkevicius and Ali Kadri, No. 159, May 2002.

**SELECTED GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION:** GDP index (1989=100), population (millions), suicide rate (per 100,000 people), employment rate (as a percentage of the active population), Male life expectancy at birth and Tuberculosis rate(per 100,000 people).



### 3. Departures from received fertility behaviour

The transition is characterised by the persistence of high rates of unemployment, especially, unemployed women. In Russia's transition context, higher unemployment would necessarily imply lower fertility. However, the view in the literature is not so straightforward.<sup>17</sup> Low variations in employment levels represent higher stability and a lesser immediate impact on the fertility rate and, the opposite holds. In one sense, women's involuntary unemployment could depress the family's income and delay or exclude pregnancy and, in another, it can be a premeditated choice in order to prepare for child bearing. In Russia's case, the degree to which the combined income level resulting from involuntary unemployment (men and women) fell drastically and depressed the family's actual and aspired standard of living, hence, falling far below the benchmark needed to sustain new life. The recovery that accompanied rising oil prices as of 2003, did not require more workers and unemployment rates remain today considerably high.<sup>18</sup> The fall in income and a lower rate of participation into the labour force, brought down the benchmark under which people feel safe enough about the future to reproduce.

Neoliberalism argues that workers can borrow to smooth their consumption (Permanent income hypothesis). In the absence of a developed money market as in Russia, workers cannot borrow to steady their consumption levels. Neoliberal economics misses the point, which is, an impoverished working class can only in rare instances of highly developed capitalism partake in the spoils of capital and that this, only occurs in the imperialist centres and for the purpose of differentiating working classes. The very capital, which in earlier stages of Soviet industrial expansion, called women into the workforce had to dispose of them in the transition and, to a certain extent, also avert their progeny.

In the developing as well as in the developed world, some empirical studies on the role of women's participation in employment conclude that the opportunity cost of having children is too high for employed women, which inversely could imply that unemployed Russian women should be bearing more children.<sup>19</sup> However, in both worlds, a woman's participation and exit from the labour force began as a matter of necessity, related to the exigencies of sustaining a relatively decent standard of living, and remained so afterwards. Although the issue of choice may be relevant in specific periods when the wealth effect and the distribution of wealth attendant thereupon take root, the overall picture however, remains that the participation or exit of women from the labour force is involuntary. In Russia where the majority of Russian families emerged from a transition with little wealth, if any, choice does not figure in the scheme of things. A relationship of employment to fertility cannot be comprehensively understood based on choice, especially in cases where there has been intense pauperisation. The drop of accumulation at the start of the transition had compressed the effects of labour demand and standard of living requirements into a very short time span. The fertility rate plummeted in direct correlation to the degradation sustained by national Soviet capital. In highly industrialized societies moreover, subsistence agriculture and extended family structures, can no longer provide an alternative platform for family support as is the case in some parts of the developing world. Farming communities can still play a social role in reproducing the labour force based on value drawn from lingering forms of subsistence/non-moneyed economies. However, these are nowhere to be found in modern Russia.

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<sup>17</sup> See Macura M., 'Marital fertility and employment in non-agricultural sectors in Yugoslavia,' *Fertility in Developing Countries*, Ed, Farooq G., and Simmons B., MacMillan 1985, pp. 403-29.

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.indexmundi.com/russia/unemployment\\_rate.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/russia/unemployment_rate.html)

<sup>19</sup> Op. cit., *Fertility in Developing Countries*, Ed, Farooq G., and Simmons B., MacMillan 1985.



Income in the form of salary or wages is a conventionally accepted measure of the resource constraints facing the family. Typically, the relationship of income to fertility is non-linear, decreasing steeply with the initial stages of a rise in income and increasing with the increase in income afterwards. There are, however, two strands of explanations associated with its effect on fertility. Total income (income of men and women) positively influences the fertility rate. In this regard, the post-war prosperity and the baby-boom generation are presented as evidence. Moreover, higher women's wages tend to raise the opportunity cost of having children, hence, negatively influencing the fertility rate. These are short-term considerations, which do not purport to the crisis condition in transition Russia, where output was halved and real family incomes fell at a higher rate than the drop in output because of skewed distributional arrangements and class restructuring favouring a robber-baron bourgeoisie.

The case may be argued conventionally that in developing countries, an increase in the share of income of wage earners is usually associated with a higher standard of living, a rise in the opportunity cost of raising children, a diversification of the acquired basket of commodities at the expense of childbearing and, subsequently, a negative relationship with the fertility rate. In more industrialized countries, empirical results have shown that a higher and stable combined income of men and women or a higher share of wages positively influence fertility until the negative price effect (cost of children) cancels the income effect (Becker, 1975).<sup>20</sup> This analysis does not constitute a thorough understanding of the social processes that underlie human reproduction. These propositions are vacuous and fit a variety of conditions depending on the class and the historical context. In economically depressed times however, as was the case with the low fertility during the great depression, the fall in income weighed down more heavily on fertility. In a period of crisis transition, such as the one experienced by Russia in the early nineties, the steep drop in the joint income of men and women redistributed socially produced value upward taking advantage of the loss of ideological appeal of socialism. The pauperisation of the Russian working class debases the life support mechanism of working people, cheapening their labour services, and squeezing generating more absolute surplus value.<sup>21</sup> When national income fell, the wage bill suffered a greater decline because of mal-distribution, and the fertility rate responded in kind to this very unkind social condition.

Statutory family benefits have long represented the mainstay or direct policy instrument of fertility in Russia. The transition government stopped sponsoring fertility through instant cash or non-cash benefits. In Soviet Russia, when benefits accrued by a family as a result of having two children were introduced, a significant and positive relationship with the fertility rate followed. Since the transition however, the reduction of these social benefits devastated reproduction. Neoliberal reforms wrested nearly all the family benefit programs. Maternity leave under Soviet Russia, which ranked high globally in terms time allotted for pregnancy, money bonuses, and state sponsored child care institutions shrank considerably. Unsurprisingly, the fertility transition rate plummeted in direct response to the fall in state capacity to sponsor a reproductive population.

#### **4. Population in relation to falling fertility rates**

Population policy and, subordinately, the politics of reproductive behaviour, provide strong evidence that the state regulates the reproduction of the workforce subject to the demands of capital accumulation. Analytically, the desired population and labour force levels are achieved between a lower point at which the ranks of the unemployed do not swell to assist in the formation of a socially

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<sup>20</sup> Becker G., 'A theory of the allocation of time', *Economic Journal*, 75(299), pp. 493-517.

<sup>21</sup> Farooq G., and DeGraff D., 'Fertility and development: An introduction to theory, empirical research and policy issues,' *World Employment Programme*, Paper no 7, ILO, 1988.

cohesive force that threatens the rule capital, or a high point at which labour shortages begin to cut into profits through higher wages. The fall of the Soviet Union was also accompanied by a fall in the ideology of collective responsibility and a rise of entrepreneurial individualism on a global scale. With socialism under ideological retreat, the possibility that the repressed social class, which would compare to what Marx named the 'déclassé,' could reverse the de-socialisation of the state was also dealt a blow. The rise in Russian mortality due to morbidity, the shorter life span, emigration, the soaring suicide and unemployment rates are issues that have gone unchecked in the early years of the transition and remain high today relative to the standards of the Soviet era.

More pertinently, in the early stages of the transition, the high death rates due to morbidity pointed to a deeper process where there was a commodification of human life. The commodity that people sell on the market, which is their labour services was joined with their very persons. In as much as the commodity stands above people and rules their lives, the abundance of the commodity of labour power implied a dispensability of human life. There are elements of notoriety in the Russian transition that corroborate Meillasoux's point that the free labourer was being reduced to a state of complete alienation. Social deconstruction meant that the quantitative aspect of population growth immediately obeyed the qualitative aspect or the crisis of capital that needs to shed the relative surplus population. Atomised families and individuals left without alternative forms of social support when incomes disappeared were also left at the mercy of an uncaring market system. The neoliberal paradigm, which reduces man to homo-economicus, as distinct from a social man, had literally applied absurd concepts of productive efficiency and equal marginal rates as policy tools. Reality was tailored to fit the fiction of free competition, earnings based on productivity and scarcity. Social man had to conform to the symbolic model man. The end result was that social man was cast off as he was any other material object.

By lowering real incomes, few employment positions were created since demand a whole was stricken down. Along with that, the removal of the social support base for reproduction, reduced the choices that could be made by families to matters relating to bare survival. To date, the robber-baron incarnate Russian state continues to manage reproductive policies with the aim of keeping fertility rates below replacement averting a possible rise in the labour force because labour demand fell as accumulation became oil and gas rent based.<sup>22</sup>

From an analytical viewpoint, the Iron Law of Wages appears to hold. For one thing, as Russia's transition economy incomes fell to extremely low levels, population levels shrunk until 2003, and failed to regain their past momentum since. However, the idea that a below subsistence wage reduces the workforce is a truism or is so true that it harbours its falsity in its own truth. Firstly, wages vary in much shorter span than what it takes to replace working generations, so it is unlikely that wages denominated in money form can suffice as an explanation of the social reproduction of the labour force. The labour force is reproduced by social value forming elements that contain both moneyed and non-moneyed components. Secondly, there is a gaping divide between the historically concrete and the analytical mode of reasoning that gauges life from the prism of prices (wages being prices). One is hard pressed to find any point in history where the increase of a surplus population relative to existing capacity does not result in some form of eruptive social pressure, notwithstanding its impact on fertility. What Neo-Malthusians do not disclose are the class structure and the mode of appropriation that have led to the immiserisation of the working class, which are, essentially, historical processes formed by the subject of history or the collective historical agents. However, since Malthus, the iron law exists as an ideological tool that posits scarcity as an inherent component of life, whereas, it is in fact socially construed. The iron law is

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, C. Meillasoux.

deployed as a disincentive to state intervention in welfare policy and, subsequently, it aids the state under capital to calibrate the rate of population growth to the highest rate of exploitation under profit seeking conditions.

Long before Malthus tackled the ‘poor law’ with his hands off welfare, the discourse relating small government to the discrepancy between the geometric evolution of population growth and arithmetic growth in resources over time was part and parcel of the intellectual environment in the eighteenth century.<sup>23</sup> The oft quoted line can be traced back to Rev. Robert Wallace’s work, ‘Various Prospects for Mankind, Nature, and Providence, 1761,’ in which he says that ‘[u]nder a perfect government .. mankind, would increase so prodigiously that the earth would be left overstocked and become unable to support its inhabitants.’ This stance represented an anti interventionist-government position, but it has been observed all too often that the call for small government is also meant to reduce the social cost of the reproduction of the labour force and to boost the process by which labour power is expendable in a shorter or ‘cheaper’ life span. It is a process by which the cheapening of the labour power requires a cheapening of the labourer. The creation of the value that labour power embodies also generates additional surplus value by the degree to which more grabbed and non-moneyed value forming components go into the reproduction of human beings. Immigrants on whom the receiving state did not expend a penny illustrate the point: their labour power was produced by another country, yet it benefits the country in which it is being used. Capital, in its pursuit of profits, needs not only to depress the wage, but also to extend fewer resources on the reproduction of the labour force. It is under this latter rubric that population growth under capitalism is best understood, to be regulated by a specific relationship of surplus value extraction, which is co-determined by the rate of replacement of living by dead labour and the resulting relative surplus population that depresses wages and augments absolute and relative surplus value.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to the Marxian approach, the new home economics paradigm, which constructs a theory around individualistic and one sided aspect of childbearing, maintains that the quality of children or the quality of life to be provided to a child is an essential component of planning child birth (Becker G. and Lewis G., 1973).<sup>25</sup> Backed by the self-evident assumption that parents seek a high standard of living for their children and that higher quality children in terms of health and education are afforded at higher income levels, parents allocate resources for child bearing within a set of preferences and income. That people naturally aspire for better living standards, is too vacuous to discuss. However, to lump children with ordinary commodities, is to reduce children to their capacity to labour and, to further drive the assumption that a capitalist market redistributes income fairly according to effort (the myth of individual wage based on personal productivity). On the former point, under the universal bill of human rights, children are born with inherent rights to decent living irrespective of their ability to labour, so it is dehumanising to compare children with commodities. On the latter score, the level of wealth is determined by productivity but the wage share is determined in the context of the class struggle. The wage system/wage is by therefore definition social. Its reproduction, in the first instance, implicates the reproduction of capital itself, which, in turn, depends on the prevailing social conditions and the repression attendant on the labour process. The organised dimension of capital tends incessantly at expansion and realisation and, under the effect of cyclical movements, it valorises and revalorises itself. The

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<sup>23</sup> Also see John B. Foster in Monthly Review, April, 2000, who provides an historical review of this question, and also highlights the dangers of rising Malthusianism in modern times.

<sup>24</sup> Marx, Capital 1, Ch. 23. Notions of residual profits cum low wages or family planning policies acquire pertinence only insofar as they adhere to this central relationship.

<sup>25</sup> Becker Gary S. and Lewis Greg, 1973, ‘Interaction between quantity and quality of children’ Journal of political economy, 81(2):s279-88.

reproduction of capital determines the ranks devolved to each of the social classes, and these are: a) production relations in particular the class rapport to the social means of production; b) the social division of labour and the function of each class in material and social reproduction and; c) in the distribution of social wealth and the form and the amount of revenue to each class and, consequently, the condition of the very existence of its members. In this sense the salary or wage of each worker is determinedly social; it is the salary/wage of a class and *not* a salary/wage of an individual aggregated and redistributed (in contrast/reference to the neoclassical paradigm). Accordingly, here lies the root of the social state and its evolution.

Furthermore, the ridiculousness of this approach comes to the fore once an additional assumption, such as the labour process under capitalism, is imputed into its framework. The behavioural response is then qualified by the class position that a family occupies. A dispossessed family, which is dependent on unsteady jobs and an uncertain future, reacts and behaves not by unrealistic choices but by necessities that social conditions impose upon it. Choices of decent living for an offspring are a function of class position and wealth. For the upper classes the issue of choice may be pertinent within narrow confines; for the working class however, the response is one of inevitability, or one by which the very instability of markets, uncertain futures and recurrent crisis shape the path human reproduction. In many respects, the drive to broaden the framework for choices and to ensure healthy and educated children becomes an outcome of the class struggle, by which working people better their living conditions across generations. Viewed from the class optic, it is the labour process under capitalism that explains the cycle in population dynamics and not an individual choice framework situated outside a historical continuum.

## 5. Parting comment

The premature disengagement of huge social assets in Russia's transition economy was implemented with the view that the uncompetitive nature of the Russian economy, whose 'marginal cost of local capital exceeds its marginal revenue' has to be shocked and revamped to better perform. Under liberalized market and trade conditions however, this practically meant the permanent dislocation of huge parts of the national economy employing nearly half the workforce, and with it, whither the welfare base. Emerging from years of limitation on political participation under soviet rule, the Russian working class was subjected to neoliberal populist rhetoric that tore asunder the long standing social relationships, which founded working-class welfare in Soviet Russia. In the neoliberal assault that was pursued during the transition, there was little concern for how the economic conditions mediate better social conditions. Soviet authoritarianism was used as an excuse to destroy many of the social support mechanisms under the false alibi that the political freedom accrued through the free market system will generate economic freedoms and better living conditions. But in the free market, marginal costs and revenues are quantities devoid of social meaning unless seen in terms of the general condition of what makes society better off. Judging by the outcome of liberalising the Russian economy, what remains is massive and lingering dislocation and an economy that grows by rents earned from the sale of natural assets as opposed to a dynamic rise in productivity. The dynamics of population and fertility growth, including the lowered life expectancy and the higher deaths due to morbidity, were shaped by the neoliberal paradigm with the aim reducing the value of human life and cheapening the outlays on labour that would generate a higher surplus value.

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