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Fertility Politics as “Social Viagra”: Reproducing Boundaries, Social Cohesion, and Modernity in Italy

ABSTRACT In this article, we investigate the delicacy of adopting pronatalism as a public position in Italy. Mounting scientific and political knowledge about the demographic “problem” exposes a new hegemonic formation that low fertility is dangerous. Drawing on ethnographic contexts, political debates, media publications, and policy documents, we trace the “demographic emergency” and compare two policies: a monetary baby bonus and a law restricting assisted reproduction. The coexistence of incentives to counter superlow fertility with prohibitions on high-tech baby making reflect the contested governance of “social cohesion.” We conclude that scholarly and popular discourses serve as a sort of “social Viagra.” Ultimately, both policies sought to rejuvenate family norms. Both aimed to fortify the political terrain of a nation-state struggling to achieve and maintain modernity against a backdrop of immigration and aging. Modernity became a weapon of the state to exert control over Italian fertility practices and of its critics to deploy orientalizing representations of backwardness. [Keywords: reproductive politics, fertility, modernity, policy, Italy]

Without children, there is no future.

—Pope John Paul II (Drioli 2002)

Raising the birthrate is a necessary condition for reestablishing in our country a framework of generational renewal consistent with the preservation of social cohesion and economic development.

—*Italian White Paper* (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2003d)

Demographic scientists agree that Italy needs rejuvenation. They do not agree on how best to achieve it. The country’s fertility rates in 1992 reached a world-record low of an average 1.2 births per woman (Delgado Pérez and Livi-Bacci 1992). Since then, experts have viewed Italians’ reproductive patterns as dangerous and hence requiring stimulation. Nationwide political intervention, however, has taken more than a decade. And when it did come—in the form of the 2003 baby-bonus law—quick to follow was a 2004 “anti-natalist” law that severely restricted access to assisted reproductive technologies. In this article, we sort out this paradox, which is, furthermore, part of a larger project that investigates the delicacy of adopting pronatalism as a public position in Italy.

Debates and policies moved from a sneaky and uneasy pronatalism in the early 1990s to an overt and urgent pronatalism by the early 2000s. Today, popular articles, expert publications, and policy discussions proliferate in relation to the “problem” of low fertility in Italy and elsewhere. Across Europe and in Japan, concerns over the “birth dearth” reverberate and appear with regularity in media reports. Russian President Vladimir Putin, for example, received wide U.S. coverage in May 2006 after his annual speech to the Federal Assembly turned to “love, women, children”; he described the demographic trend as “the most acute problem facing our country today” and pleaded with deputies to support profamily incentives to boost the total fertility rate from 1.28—a level that ties it with Italy and Spain (Balter 2006:1894). Concerning the health of the social body in Italy, demographic experts suggest the reproductive patterns signal “pathological” trends such as a “postponement syndrome” (Sgritta 2003:65; Livi-Bacci 2001:147) and “profound malaise” (Golini et al. 2000), and they question “whether a rapid population decline can be sustained for long without a general impoverishment of society” (Livi-Bacci 2001:142). A French sociologist projects “collective suicide” (Giovara 2002), and journalists forecast “the extinction of motherhood” (Doi 2004). The underlying message is that Italians need to have more babies. As

anthropologists, we are interested in tracing the emergence and consequences of a pronatalist stance.

Policies are ultimately total social phenomena as they speak to ideologies; they serve as statements of the “ethical” state (Abrams 1988; Corrigan and Sayer 1991; Shore and Wright 1997). Inspired by that insight, together with the centrality of reproduction for theorizing social dynamics (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995), a fundamental question guides our inquiry: If we recognize reproduction as a locus for state control in the modern era of biopower (after Foucault 1978), what mechanisms does a neoliberal democratic state use to justify such political action? Specifically, we trace the process by which state practices attempt to assert authority over the control of fertility. We suggest that policymakers’ efforts to control reproduction ultimately enable “the state” to redefine its boundaries, situate itself in relation to modernity, and express its preferred moral orientations.

Abundant scientific and political knowledge related to the “problem” of low fertility reflects a new hegemonic formation for postwar Italy. Characteristic of this historic bloc (after Gramsci 1971) is the commonsense notion that low fertility has become indisputably dangerous. Tracing the discourse of “demographic emergency” across a charged European political landscape, we found heightened concern over the future of Italy in terms of social cohesion, economic viability, and modern status. Indeed, “modernity” became a weapon of the state and its experts, used to pass legislation with the hope of augmenting births. At the same time, “modernity” and perceived threats to it also became a weapon of those who were critical of the state’s new position to restrict access to procreative technologies.

Our research on family making and fertility tracks back and forth between cultural politics on the ground and policymaking politics in the national arena. We use the term *fertility* in two senses. On the one hand, the *total fertility rate* in demographic parlance refers to the average number of children a woman will have over the course of her lifetime; on the other hand, *fertility* refers to the fecundity of a couple and their capacity to conceive a child. Ethnographic research revealed a social context in which the small-family norm is widespread. Pronatalist policymakers sought to overcome this norm with rationalized, nationalistic appeals that emphasized the importance of replenishing Italy with Italian babies rather than immigrant Others. Similarly, the law restricting access to procreative technologies aimed to reproduce only certain kinds of families. Politicians appealed to family norms and played on popular and Catholic fears regarding technological intervention. At the same time, however, as public opposition defended science, activists depicted Italy as sliding closer to Islam and farther from the modern West. Throughout our research, we discovered in the formulation of fertility policies a profound self-consciousness about Italy’s modern status.

Our analysis leads us to conclude that scholarly as well as popular discourses themselves serve as a sort of “social

Viagra”: They fortify the political terrain of a nation-state struggling to achieve a durable and confident modernity. Just as Viagra is designed to pump life into an impotent man, so, we argue, does the discursive incitement around the low fertility attempt to reinvigorate an “impotent” nation via the family. Furthermore, although the discursive strategies of policies primarily target women, the Viagra metaphor reminds that low fertility is not just a “women’s problem”; because of the relationality of gender, it is a social phenomenon that intrinsically involves the construction of masculinity as well as sexuality. Discourses circulate and, as Susan Gal (2003) has observed, transform text as well as context. The term *social Viagra* suggests the presence of a dysfunction or even a pathology, complete with a patient and a prescription. The remedy of Viagra reminds us of the importance of virility. Extending the metaphor of social Viagra to the broader context of reproductive relations, we aim to convey policymakers’ view of women’s fertility as something that can threaten or reinvigorate not only the family but also the nation. In Italy, the government seeks to stimulate births but within limits. Not all family forms are equally acceptable. The pronatalist and “antinatalist” laws, therefore, are not so paradoxical as they might at first appear. Together, these policies reveal a project of national rejuvenation that delimits desirable and nondesirable populations.

To arrive at this conclusion, we deployed standard and multisited ethnographic methods: interviews, participant-observation, and document gathering. The investigation builds on Elizabeth Krause’s two years of fieldwork in the Province of Prato (1995–97, with month-long follow-ups in 1999 and 2002), which was informed by fascist pronatalism and resulted in a reflexive ethnography of contemporary family-making experiences in Italy in which Krause’s own participation as a parent-activist played a key role (Krause 2005a). In addition, Krause spent four months in spring 2004 in Prato, and Milena Marchesi conducted ethnographic research in Rome, where she returned in June 2005. Marchesi’s interest in experiences and differential access to reproductive technologies of migrant and Italian-born women has roots in her own family’s experience of the demographic transition, particularly memories of the 16 pregnancies of a grandmother who migrated from the rural South of Sicily to the urban north of Milan. As collaborators, we attended conferences on family policymaking as well as immigration; we observed roundtables, debates, working groups, book readings, and even a theatrical performance; we consulted with and interviewed doctors and researchers at clinics, key politicians, union leaders, patient-rights organizers, and feminist activists; and we participated in protests as well as seminars with Italian scholars working on fertility, the family, and new reproductive technologies. In addition, document gathering and analysis in fall 2003 and 2004 focused on parliamentary debates, media reports of those debates, policy texts, and conference proceedings related to reproductive politics: We examined, on the one hand, policies designed to offer economic and temporal

incentives for baby making and, on the other hand, policies geared to construct restrictions for high-tech baby making.

DESIRING MODERNITY, GOVERNING THE FAMILY

Our research on family practices and policymaking in Italy, much to our surprise, laid bare the desires of and for modernity, whether from talk among politicians, academics, or activists, or through the writings of policymakers or scientists. Modern status in Italy is not a given. Modernity has been notably “at large” in social theory over the past decade (Appadurai 1996; Hodgson 2001; Knauft 2002). Our fieldwork confirmed to us, often in unexpected ways, that modernity is a popular as well as political concern, and one that involves struggles over “social cohesion,” a term that has become a rallying point around which to forge policies for addressing economic and demographic trends related to aging, birthing, and immigration.

As discourses of modernity circulate globally, local populations bring their own histories and meanings to bear on ideas about what is modern (Donham 2002:241; Hannerz 1992). British historian Patrick McCarthy describes a “huge question-mark” that hangs over Italian society: “Can it make the effort of modernization that its hard-won role as a leading EU nation demands?” (2000:215). Italy’s modernity is a question, a conditional state, an ambiguity, and a desire.

Concern with modernizing Italy found strong expression under fascist policy and continued to guide policy throughout the 20th century. At the heels of WWII, Italian society experienced a radical and rapid transformation from a mostly agrarian society to a largely industrialized society. Millions emigrated from rural hinterlands to urban centers. The bustling industrial districts, comprised of small- and medium-sized firms such as the textile center of Prato in Tuscany, defied the standards of economic development (Becattini 2001). Economic change occurred swiftly over only a few decades. Whereas before the war, agricultural work was the occupation of about 50 percent of working Italians, by the 1990s that number had decreased tenfold to five percent (McCarthy 2000:10). Frequently dubbed the “economic miracle,” Italy became almost overnight among the most powerful economies in the world. Yet this term points to a vexing contradiction: The word *miracle* indexes a magical as opposed to rational realm, and it reflects an atypical form of capitalism that has continued to haunt Italy in the prosperous postwar years (*Economist* 2005; Turani 2004). Italy’s fast path through economic development toward modernization entailed significant ruptures and disjunctures.

The self-consciousness of this break permeates discourses on nostalgia and progress, peasant stigma, and romanticization (Krause 2005b). The pervasiveness of the “metaphor of backwardness” in Italy informs the country’s relationship to the rest of Europe as well as the United States (Agnew 1997:24). The nation’s desire to enter the

European Union and the economic sacrifices it enacted reflect the dichotomous stakes of modernization. “It was a question of becoming ‘another Egypt’ or remaining in the West” (Harper 2000:115). The dichotomous language of “backwardness” and “modernity” saturate discourses in and about Italy.

Notions of “the modern” are particularly relevant to reproductive and family-making policies and practices, as a number of ethnographic studies demonstrate (Kanaaneh 2002; Paxson 2004; Rivkin-Fish 2003; Schneider and Schneider 1996). In her research on China’s one-child policy, Susan Greenhalgh observes that the “planned child” can only be modern in comparison with the backwardness of the “unplanned child.” Paradoxically, this “distinctly unmodern person” (Greenhalgh 2003:209), whose (non)existence the state constructed, acts simultaneously as modernity’s necessary foil. The unplanned, unmodern subject threatens to undermine the status of the planned, modern subject. The dynamic echoes Stuart Hall’s (1992) prediction of modernity’s ever-present underdog. His postcolonial reading of modernity underscores an array of nested binaries: modern versus backward, progressive versus traditional, rational versus irrational, and West versus the “Rest.” Modernity necessarily depends on comparison to, and distinction from, an Other who is either more or less modern.

The dichotomous character of modernity manifests itself in Italy’s reproductive context. The superlow fertility situation constitutes a very modern context. Modernity emerges vigorously in population and reproductive discourses—evidence that these realms and the practices they entail continue to be crucial to the modern state’s governance. The traditional family has been identified as an obstacle to overcome in raising Italy’s fertility rates and as a barrier to the country’s progress. John Agnew (1997:37) attributes Italy’s perceived backwardness, in part, to the continuing influence and survival of “tradition,” “‘non-rational’ values,” and the centrality of the family. Italian demographer Gianpiero Dalla Zuanna (2001:156) refers to the persistence of a familistic society as a “pyrrhic victory” because of the risk of rapid aging and population decline. The view of the Italian family as a hindrance to modernity, even a “dragging force” in terms of the ties between generations (Dalla Zuanna 2004:66; Livi-Bacci 2001), continues to have purchase today (Ginsborg 2003). The perception of the family as a barrier to modernity fits into a capitalist and modernist ideology concerned with “the ‘freeing’ of individuals from the supposedly stifling bonds of family and community” (Hodgson 2001:3).

The dominant representation of “a backward Italy . . . struggling with modernity” (Agnew 1997:27) finds its precedent in Edward Banfield’s *The Moral Basis of a Backwards Society* (1958). Banfield depicted the residents of a village in the southern region of Basilicata as narrowly concerned with the immediate family at the expense of the broader community. Banfield used the term *amoral familism* (1958: 10, 11, 83–101, 139, 155–158) to describe a lack of

civic-mindedness that, he argued, impeded the region’s development. This assessment came to describe most of southern Italy. The specter of amoral familism continues to haunt Italy.

The theme of amoral familism found its way into a policy document by Livia Turco, Italy’s minister for social affairs from 1996–2001. Turco (2000:5) commended her colleagues for finally placing the family center stage in their policymaking during her tenure because of “an awareness of the need to invert the trend . . . [of] sterile familism that has distinguished the last 50 years during which the Italian family has been left alone to bear the burden of all the social and economic changes” (Sgritta 2001:9).

Backwardness appeared in the expert testimony of demographer Massimo Livi-Bacci at a two-day conference “Let’s Raise the Family” sponsored by the center-left Margherita Party in February 2004 in the Veneto region of northern Italy. As part of our ethnographic research, we joined an audience of about 150 attendees as Livi-Bacci described Italy’s fertility situation as having “pathological aspects.” Comparing Italy’s fertility rates with those of France and Scandinavian countries, he noted the northern European cousins’ effective measures to boost their lagging birth rates. By contrast, Italy is experiencing a “syndrome of lateness” ranging from the delay of the Italian nation-state in policy implementation to a delay of Italian individuals in family making. Young Italians are “behind” their European counterparts in every measure: in completing schooling, in median age for starting work, in leaving the parental home, and “behind in making vital decisions . . . such as raising a family.” He told the audience that all of this adds up to a “grave delay” (field notes, February 28, 2004).¹

Italy’s evident concern with its mimetic variety of modernity, on the one hand, and its social cohesion, on the other hand, brings to mind the origins of sociological theory. In Eric Wolf’s by-now classic telling of this history, the field of sociology emerged from a collective sense that the atrophy of community threatened the social order. A generation of sociologists sought to grapple with “a common view that modern life entails a progressive disintegration of the lifeways that marks the ‘good old days’ of our forebears” (Wolf 1982:11). Theorists were responding to the fallout of 19th-century social ties that had transformed because of the “twin impact of capitalism and industrialization” (Wolf 1982:11). Their influential views gave rise to a series of polarities. Ferdinand Tönnies’s *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) became the essential negatively and positively charged poles that many other scholars’ models echoed, including Emile Durkheim’s concept of “social solidarity,” which ended with modern society’s complementarity descending into anomie. Max Weber’s elaborate formulation of modern society, with its bureaucratic techniques of governance, retained a certain mistrust for the rational state. The postwar modernization paradigm, however, had the power to sweep away all of those negative associations of the capitalist state. Wolf credits Talcott Parsons with this

“simple change of signs” (1982:12). Indeed, “‘modernization theory’ became an instrument for bestowing praise on societies deemed to be modern and casting a critical eye on those that had yet to attain that achievement” (Wolf 1982:12).

Such projects of simple changes in signs, however, are not always so simple to live. They give rise to contradictions. In the case of family making and state intervention, fertility rates have long been a marker of modern status; indeed, as Kamran Ali (2002:36) convincingly reminds us, overpopulation is frequently blamed for underdevelopment. Indeed, once there was a metaphoric measuring stick that marked “rational” reproducers as those who had embraced the demographic transition and contrasted those with “irrational” reproducers who had not. Those old distinctions no longer apply in a society with superlow fertility rates. Our ethnographic research reveals a nuanced flip-flopping in poles. Representations in Italy of the demographic situation as producing “tensions that give rise to downright perverse effects” and as being “unsustainable for society at large” (Sgritta 2001:4–6) point to the family as a site where the terms of modernity are struggled over as the state attempts to exercise control over reproduction and to attain “social cohesion.”

“SOCIAL VIAGRA” IN THE NAME OF “BABIES WHO REFUSE TO BE BORN”

Aware of alarmist language and “sneaky pronatalism” (see Krause 2001:599, 2005a:178–181), we were curious about the conditions that permitted policymakers’ efforts to control reproduction in Italy. Through the 1990s, no broad-sweeping pronatalist policies had been proposed or passed. In fall 2003, the Berlusconi government maneuvered to pass the first postwar “baby-bonus” law. The government offered 1,000 euros to Italian or European citizens who gave birth to, or adopted, a second child between December 1, 2003, and December 31, 2004. The baby bonus marked the first nationwide pronatalist policy since Benito Mussolini’s infamous demographic measures that taxed bachelors, rewarded prolific couples, criminalized abortion, outlawed contraceptives, and narrowly defined women as reproducers for empire.²

We embarked on an investigation into the discourses of “rational governance” (after Foucault 1991). How did the bad word of *pronatalism* once again become legitimate, acceptable, even respectable? What plowing of the political terrain enabled this shift?

The law itself reflects the prevalent expert view that fertility rates are dangerously low and require intervention; however, it counters a widespread opinion among Italians that having few children has become moral and respectable. In no small way, limiting births to one or two children has become the quintessential sign of being modern. This popular small-family view manifests itself in Italy’s lowest low fertility rates. It also was explicitly expressed to Krause during fieldwork in the Province of Prato.

A culture of responsibility dictates an intense set of expectations for Italian parents, particularly mothers, in terms of attaining and displaying middle-class respectability (after Schneider and Schneider 1996). Italian demographer Livi-Bacci (2001) suggests that Italy's lowest-low fertility results from "too much family": that is, Italians retain excessively strong family ties and care deeply about providing for their children. Young adults tend to wait to attain desirable personal, economic, and educational status before becoming parents themselves (Livi-Bacci 2001:146). Krause's ethnographic research confirmed the view of a society that continues to value strong families, while also emphasizing historical adjustments, at times traumatic, to the rigid pecking order of a patriarchal family (2005a:184). The unraveling of a family hierarchy is deeply linked to economic shifts, and it necessitated a subsequent reworking of gendered subjects located in new socioeconomic consumption contexts, which weigh heavily on mothers (see Krause 2005c). Italian parenting is anything but *disinvolto*, or laid back. Parents, especially mothers, devote substantial time, attention, and discipline to the cleanliness of the houses, the precision of well-laundered and ironed clothes, the selection and preparation of food, and the measured attention to children's health and educations—all reflections of a serious attitude toward parenting.³

Sweatmaker Carlotta, a native of Prato with a middle-school education, recounted to Krause during an interview in July 1997 her strategy of deflecting her daughter's pleas for her to have a second child:

"Look, Alice. I would like to make you a little brother or a little sister. But see you are, you're not a child," I go, "that listens to your mamma, you're not a well-behaved child, you always want to do everything, to . . ."—even if I know Alice, she's a good kid, she's not bad. So I told her, "Look, Alice," I go, "if you yourself were a more tranquil, calm child," and then I told her, "and if you *would eat more*," because y'know she makes me a wreck, it's all about eating. And "if you would eat more, then I could make you a little sister or a little brother." [audiotape interview, 50, Province of Prato, July 15, 1997]

Carlotta drew on dominant morals—in which precision, rationality, and order were deemed necessary—to suggest that her daughter's behavior prevented the "gift" of a sibling.

The commonly heard phrases "*Ci vuole tanto a vestire un figliolo ogni giorno*" (it takes a lot to dress a child everyday) and "*stare dietro ad un figliolo*" (to guide a child attentively) express the persistent "necessity" of the self-sacrificing mother (Krause 2005a:145). Those who violated the small-family norm faced censure, particularly if they were of humble means. When Cinzia, a displaced sweatmaker-turned-housecleaner, was pregnant with her third son in 1996, family and friends chastised her. Of her mother, she recalled, "to us children she has always said, 'Hey! You're stupid if you have another one. . . . Two are enough for you.'" Although in theory Cinzia agreed, she nevertheless continued the pregnancy. The decision brought harsh criticism.

"There was one [woman] carrying on, 'to have three kids here in town, we are half-witted,' understand?" (audiotape interview, 34, Province of Prato, October 23, 1996).

With this context of conflicting views between the state and its subjects vis-à-vis family size, we sought to understand how the bad word of *pronatalism* had become legitimate, acceptable, even respectable in policymaking arenas. Toward that end, we analyzed media and political discourse. We gathered from Italian newspapers more than 250 articles concerning low fertility, babies, births, and childcare between January 1, 2000, and September 22, 2003.⁴ We followed debates related to the baby bonus via online publications as well as transcriptions of parliamentary debates. We amassed and read hundreds of pages of text related to the proposal, including legislative documents themselves.

Many Italians criticized the baby-bonus law as a pathetic effort at offsetting the costs of childrearing. Commentators on the political left chastised it for ignoring need: All citizens, no matter their income levels, were eligible for the same 1,000 euros. Several people joked that the bonus was barely enough for a year's supply of diapers. Hardly anyone seemed to take the bonus seriously.

The exception was 40-year-old policy researcher Marta, married without children. She found the new policy offensive. A fair policy would seek to assist all "families" with, for example, affordable housing—regardless of whether they had children, were single, or gay. Marta expressed feelings of oppression from social norms that expected adult women to reproduce, and she found it repulsive that a government policy would legitimize such a narrow path for one's life. The fact that having children was not in her future plans led age-mates with children to question her judgment. Through nervous laughter, she recounted a recent comment from a colleague: " 'But why are you so allergic to this?' " She continued, "However, it's the way they say it, really discriminatory, that is—I don't know how to explain it—[an attitude] of non-acceptance" (audiotape interview, 04–16, Province of Prato, February 4, 2004).

The roots of pronatalist sentiment extend across the political spectrum. Our research revealed that the Left, drawing on expert demographic knowledge, helped authorize widely accepted state perspectives on the low-fertility "problem." Up through the turn of the millennium, the closest thing to a nationwide pronatalist policy was the parental leave legislation of March 8, 2000, a capstone course of action of the leftwing government in power from May 1996 to May 2001. Its leading policymakers tiptoed around the pronatalist aspects of the law, emphasizing instead its contributions toward gender parity. Proponents argued that the law would "modernize" the sexist division of labor in the family and the double burden on women. The specter of backwardness was ever present in the policy discussions. Minister for Social Affairs Livia Turco described a "common" reality: "Women are forced, at the time of their hiring, to declare that they will not have children. This is an unacceptable barbaric practice!" She called for flexible work time as a way to reconcile two needs: more

productivity and more family time. “Otherwise,” she said, “forget the zero birthrate!” (Camera dei Deputati 1999).

Pronatalism was depicted as a secondary consequence, yet a 1999 interview about the parental leave bill revealed pronatalism to be politically problematic. A journalist accused Turco of backing a pronatalist policy. Turco rebutted: “This is not a natalist policy, but, in a country that is not having children, we want to make sure that all the women and men who desire to have children will be, as much as possible, in the condition to follow their desire” (Masci 1999). Turco suggested an increase in birthrates would be “heading in the right direction.” The minister’s response exemplifies the ambiguity of the Left vis-à-vis pronatalism. Furthermore, the discourse surrounding the parental leave legislation marks an important moment in the formation of hegemonic views regarding the “problem” of low fertility.

Another important influence derived from an EU conference of the Council of Ministers in 2000, when the term *social cohesion* emerged as a priority. Our analysis shows how the concept of “social cohesion” morphed as it moved from the EU to the Italian context. A comparison of the EU and Italian texts reveals striking differences between the two entities’ framing of social cohesion, demographic concerns, and economic development. Whereas the EU text emphasized immigration over fertility as a solution, the comparable Italian document tipped the balance so far toward the fertility field that any potential for an immigrant solution all but disappeared. In its place arose a political terrain readymade for pronatalist policy.

The EU concept of “social cohesion” centered on ensuring “the welfare of all its members,” protecting vulnerable groups through employment and workers’ rights, and combating discrimination and cooperating on migration (Höhn 2005:9–10, 28). In light of concerns about population dynamics in Europe, the councilors anticipated a need for immigration to encourage non-European newcomers over newborns (Commission of the European Community 2001:5–6). The council steers clear of pronatalist discourse. A related conference on public broadcasting underscored the importance of pan-European support: “To promote social cohesion between the different cultures that represent contemporary Europe and to ensure social and economic progress requires tremendous energy and commitment from the Member States and European institutions” (Anonymous 2004:1).

The *Italian White Paper on the Welfare State* (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2003d) picked up where the EU conference left off. This national policy document justified the shift away from welfare state and toward neoliberal models so as to keep up with the rest of Western Europe. Unlike the EU document, *The Italian White Paper* claimed that Italy faces a “demographic abyss” and that social cohesion hinges on fertility issues (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2003d:4). This, in turn, justified turning up the volume on pronatalist discourse and introducing policies specifically aimed at increasing fertility: “Two objectives are singled out as priorities: to favor the

birthrate and to improve family policies” (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2003b). *The Italian White Paper* described its central policy contribution as “the fact that, finally, the family founded on marriage is placed front and center in the system of social protection” (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2003c). Furthermore, *The Italian White Paper* omitted immigration as an alternative to increase population. As a result, immigration hangs like a threat to social cohesion and thus to the future of the country, whereas fertility emerges as a national priority. The silence reverberates, especially because *The Italian White Paper* refers to the European document (see also Dalla Zuanna 2003).

Concerns surrounding Italy’s “graying” population and aging workforce legitimized pronatalist measures. Just as Dalla Zuanna (2004) has said of Italy’s declining fertility—that in the 20th century it was important for the country’s economic development—now in the 21st century raising the low fertility has become essential to Italy’s viability in the global marketplace. The document delineated the relationship between the birthrate and economic competitiveness in the global economy, singling out “raising the birthrate” as “a necessary condition for reestablishing in our country a framework of generational renewal consistent with the preservation of social cohesion and economic development” (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2003a:9). In the process of reworking the welfare system, the Berlusconi government took *social cohesion*, a term with an EU stamp of legitimacy, and imbued it with a more exclusive meaning that disqualified social reproduction outside of the narrowly defined “Italian” family.

Significantly, funding for the baby bonus found its source in the Finanziaria, the budget legislation. “It’s the first time that the family enters in the Dpef [the budget document],” noted minister of welfare Robert Maroni (Palmerini 2003:8). Thus, political leaders asserted a connection between the economic survival of the nation and the management of the family: Encouraging an increase in births became the primary solution to remedy those stubborn “babies who refuse to be born” (Salis 2003).

Politicians also invoked cultural dimensions to the demographic “crisis.” As minister of equal opportunities Stefania Prestagiacomo put it: “The low fertility rate creates a problem for the future of our country, not just economically, but also culturally and in terms of national identity” (Pa 2002). At a 2002 convention involving young Italian entrepreneurs, Economic Minister Giulio Tremonti disagreed with suggestions that immigration might constitute a solution to the population trends on the grounds that it “doesn’t resolve the pension problem, nor does it right the demographic curves.” Moreover, he invoked cultural reasons: “I have nothing against couscous, but I really favor pesto” (Ippolito 2002:10). These linguistic choices were not arbitrary: Couscous can be interpreted as a synecdoche for Muslims, pesto for Italians, and particularly those from the north, where fertility rates are especially low (see Hill 1998). Demographic data estimate just under 2.7 million resident

noncitizens as of December 31, 2005. The top-sending five countries, each with more than 100,000 immigrants registered in Italy, were Albania, Morocco, Romania, China, and the Ukraine (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica [Istat] 2006).

The tension between births and immigrants was expressed in a comment that inspired the title for our article. In a speech to young Italian entrepreneurs by the president of the Confindustria, Antonio D'Amato spoke positively of immigration and of the nation's need to be an "open society," but he then called for strict controls. He absolutely opposed immigration as a form of "social Viagra":

We cannot open ourselves up to immigration, as has been suggested in the debate, as if it were the social Viagra that would make us young again. I am annoyed, almost horrified, when I hear that this is the motivation, that our country ages and thus has to rejuvenate itself with immigration. [Ippolito 2002:10]

The industry leader desired social policies that encouraged births. Implicit is an argument against replacing Italians with immigrants. The baby bonus is available to any EU citizen despite attempts by the Alleanza Nazionale party to restrict baby bonus eligibility to Italian citizens. The law follows a trend of pronatalist policies as ethnically inclusive contingent on citizenship (King 2002); even so, minority groups' experiences of demographic policies can be unequal (see Kanaaneh 2002).

A year after the law's passage, the center-left Margherita party responded to the pronatalist momentum of the Berlusconi government with its "Let's Raise the Family" conference. There, it was suggested that attempts at forging family policy constitute politically dangerous territory for Italy's Left. Party leader Rosy Bindi drew on presenter Livi-Bacci's demographic facts as she called on attendees to support strong proposals: "It's the data that tell us. Livi Bacci [says] in Italy we have the worst demographic situation in the world" and "a party like ours has to have the courage to make a strong proposal, it cannot be afraid" (field notes, February 28, 2004). Experts emphasized Italy's perennial lagging behind other Western European countries, whether in fertility rates, family policies and practices, or tax codes, and pointed to other European countries for standards and solutions. A major departure from the discourse surrounding the baby-bonus incentive, however, was her warning against narrow definitions of "the family." Her final speech climaxed in an impassioned demand for universal eligibility of benefits that should be available to "every child that is born; we don't care whether [the parents are] married, cohabiting, Muslims, or born in vitro. The little children are all the same" (field notes, February 29, 2004).

"NO TALIBAN, NO VATICAN"

Contemporaneous to the baby-bonus law, another policy aimed at governing the Italian family worked its way through the Parliament. The new law on medically assisted reproduction, approved February 2004, limits treatment to

heterosexual couples genetically related to the offspring they seek to conceive. Prospective patients must prove cohabitation with a partner of the opposite sex. Thus, the Italian state's restrictions on assisted reproduction coexist with policies aimed at stimulating births through the modest incentive of the "baby bonus." An Italian political cartoon from December 2003 highlighted this paradox. It depicted Pope John Paul II giving an unusual New Year's blessing: "Italians! Be fruitful and do not multiply!" (Forattini 2003). The cartoon speaks to the antinatalist overtones of the assisted reproduction law; however, on closer examination, the law and its related debates reveal an undertone of selective pronatalism aimed at reproducing the normative Italian family in the name of social cohesion.

Such reassertion of the "traditional" family for the sake of society was hotly contested. Somewhat to our surprise, the terms and strategies of this contestation consistently called into question Italy's modernity and backwardness. Those opposed to the assisted reproduction law, widely perceived as Vatican supported, claimed to be engaged in an unresolved, uniquely Italian struggle between the Enlightenment and the Roman Catholic Church. The tension manifested not only critiques summed up by the ubiquitous "No Taliban, No Vatican" signs at protests but also unself-conscious Orientalizing representations of the "oppressed Muslim woman" as the symbol of a dangerous non-Western backwardness afoot in Italy.

Legislation on assisted reproduction had been in the works for over two decades in part to overcome Italy's reputation as the "Wild West" of reproduction. The country had a laissez-faire fertility policy that attracted postmenopausal women seeking in vitro fertilization and other interventions. A 1995 article in the *New York Times* reported, "Italy is virtually the only country in Europe that still has no law, no controls, not even any minimum regulation governing more than 100 private clinics that perform various fertilization procedures" and argued that "this legal vacuum has led to charges that Italy has become the Wild West" of assisted reproduction and "a mecca for foreign women who come here for 'procreative tourism'" (Bohlen 1995: A14).⁵ The president of a patient-advocacy organization opposed to the legislation told us with regret that she coined the "Wild West" term herself back in the early 1990s while lobbying for "progressive" regulation of assisted reproduction. She felt she would never live down her responsibility for a term that "boomeranged" into the sound-bite justification for the current law (personal communication, March 23, 2004).

Parliamentary debates over the bill were heated and controversial. The law prohibits single women or same-sex couples from accessing infertility treatments in Italy, even in private clinics. For heterosexual couples who qualify for assistance, the law bans a number of previously available technologies, including third-party donor-assisted fertilization, cryogenic freezing, and preimplantation selection of embryos. The law also limits the numbers of embryos to be created yet mandates transfer of all created embryos in

utero. This requirement led some feminist lawmakers to describe the law as a form of state-supported sexual violence, as “inapplicable and nazi-like” (Franca Bimbi, Camera dei Deputati 2002b), even dubbing it “la legge crudele” (lit., “the cruel law”). Furthermore, the law raised profound questions about the juridical status of the embryo.

For many opponents of the law, the regulation of scientific research and reproductive rights represents Italy’s turn away from the promise of the European project of the Enlightenment. Some legislators implored their fellow lawmakers not to turn away from science, not to let Italy slide “a thousand miles [away] from Europe” (Marida Bolognesi, Camera dei Deputati 2002c) by approving such a restrictive and “backward” law. Alessandra Mussolini, granddaughter of the dictator and one of the loudest voices of protest against the law, called on her colleagues to vote against it for the sake of maintaining Italy’s place in Europe: “I beg you, let us not distance ourselves from Europe; we would be the lone country in Europe!” (Camera dei Deputati 2002b). Critics of the law both inside and outside of Parliament identified the right to scientific research and reproductive choice as central tenants of a civil, modern, and Western society. In contrast, its supporters warned of the eugenic potential of assisted reproductive technologies and appealed to the state’s responsibility to recognize and thus protect human life from its inception at fertilization. They argued that unregulated assisted reproduction makes possible “unnatural” forms of reproduction that hurt the embryo, the future child, the family, and ultimately society by tearing at its “ethical fabric” (Camera dei Deputati 2002a). These lawmakers offered an alternative vision of European modernity, one rooted in Europe’s Christian roots.

The political fallout of this legislation reveals the power of a master narrative like modernity to subsume other debates though often in contested terms. Whether in Parliament, in the media, or at debates and protests, critics of the law focused on its negative implications for the status of science, research, and modernity in Italy. At a protest in front of the Chamber of Deputies, activists carried signs that read: “Freedom of Scientific Research!”; “Referendum for the Right to Medical Treatment. No to the Unenlightened Law. Yes to Research”; “No to the New [Burning at the] Stakes”; and the ubiquitous “No Taliban, No Vatican.” Political activists coalesced around the theme of the law’s backwardness, signified by the moral regulation of science and family making.⁶

This strategy proved effective to the extent that it reflected a shared self-consciousness about Italy’s modernity, especially among the Italian Left. We found self-deprecating concerns over Italy’s backwardness at various sites as we conducted our research in the field. At a roundtable on bioethics in a Roman hotel, a professor of philosophy declared that “we [in Italy] did not do the scientific revolution, did not have humanism . . . (there is) little reflection in a country that is also not well educated . . . there is little scientific life and ability to reason” (field notes, February 15, 2004). Another speaker, the president of the patient-

advocacy organization, argued that “the family that this law is supposed to protect is the family of the fifties, Catholic, . . . which we don’t find anymore in today’s society, as Istat [the National Statistics Institute] says. This law wants to bring us back by force.” She contrasted the law with a legislative proposal in which she had been involved in the 1990s by describing the latter as “a modern proposal, with safeguards, very advanced, very Anglo Saxon” (personal communication, March 23, 2004).

Interviews revealed a range of regretful responses. A woman in her late twenties who volunteers with the “White Cross” in northern Italy cringed when she heard that we were researching the assisted reproduction legislation: “Oh, you are here to look at our disgrace” (personal communication, May 4, 2004). A self-identified progressive, queer woman from central Italy expressed a similar sentiment, describing the legislation as “worthy of the third world” (personal communication, August 5, 2004). Participant-observation at one of Rome’s private fertility clinics revealed a growing ease with interventions among those intimately familiar with the technologies. Clara, a biologist in her mid-thirties, had specialized in assisted fertilization through an internship in Paris where Intracytoplasmic sperm injection, or ICSI, was in its pioneer phase. She described her work as cutting-edge and exciting: “I became passionate about it, I [still] dream about it at night.” As she moved from her microscope station to an incubator, Clara told Marchesi that on the day the law went into effect, she cried as much as she had on September 11, 2001 (personal communication, April 8, 2004). Her tears were not in response to the restriction of women’s reproductive freedom but, rather, to the thwarting of progress. These critiques point to, and draw on, deep-seated fears: Limiting science and women’s reproductive choices places Italy in danger of sliding away from modern Europe while moving closer to a Catholic fundamentalism that to critics is too close for comfort to fundamentalist Islam. These concerns index the ever-present threat of Italy’s backwardness.

From public critiques to personal conversations, a common organizing principle emerged: the trope of oppressive Islamic regimes as the antithesis of Western modernity. Politicians, scholars, and journalists opposed to the law referred to it as a “burqua law” (Caporale 2004; Valentini 2003), a “Taliban law,” a “monster law” (Caporale 2004), “a battle of civilizations,” a “law that takes Italy out of Europe” (De Luca 2004), a “barbaric law” (Zegarelli 2004), and, finally, a law that “could have been conceived in one of the many states ruled by Sharia law which seeks control over women’s bodies” (Bolognetti 2004). The implication was that the Vatican’s influence on Italian politics made Italy little better than an Islamic fundamentalist theocracy—and certainly not a modern, European liberal democracy. Classic and contemporary colonialist discourses rank societies, and justify their domination, on the basis of the treatment of “their” women (see Said 1978). Chandra Mohanty (1991) has famously critiqued Western feminists for asserting their modernity through their representations of

oppressed non-Western women. Rubah Salih, who has studied well-educated Muslim women in Italy who self-identify as modern, argues that “the day-to-day orientalist construction by newspapers, television and politicians of the Muslim Other as illiberal, traditional and pre-modern, feeds on Italian society’s longing to represent itself as modern and progressive, acquitting itself from the charges of being a traditional and religious society” (2002:149). Critics of the assisted reproduction law who associate its supporters with fundamentalist Islam are simultaneously defining their own position as modern and hence suitably European.

We came to understand the articles that make up the assisted reproduction law as a set of moral guidelines in family making that fit into the political discursive field on the Italian family and the “problem” of low fertility. These moral arguments parallel government claims in *The Italian White Paper* that the country’s future depends on its social cohesion. Social cohesion, according to the government, can only be sustained through reproduction within the heterosexual family (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d). As Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias foretold, women are called on not just to reproduce for the nation but also “in terms of the ‘proper’ way” to have children so as to “reproduce the boundaries of the symbolic identity of their group or that of their husbands” (1989:9; see Alonso 1994; Gal and Kligman 2000). In contrast, Susan Kahn’s (2000) ethnography of assisted reproduction in Israel, another state concerned with boosting birth rates of its citizens, demonstrates that states may choose other strategies, such as providing financial support for women to reproduce, regardless of sexual orientation or family status. In contrast, the Italian legislation suggests the “proper way to have children” is within the bounds of the heterosexual family organized around traditional gender roles and a cohesiveness borne of homogeneity.

Some of the scientific terminology used in the assisted reproduction law and its debates reflects this concern with the boundaries of the family and nation: The law draws on the medical term *fecondazione eterologa*, or heterologous fertilization, to denote third-party-donor fertilization, in other words fertilization that includes sperm or eggs originating outside of the presenting couple. The corollary term, *fecondazione omologa*, or homologous fertilization, refers to techniques that make use of the couple’s own gametes. After Bruno Latour (1993), Federico Neresini and Franca Bimbi (2000:214) argue that these are “‘hybrid’ concepts, in that they confuse nature and society” by biologizing the heterosexual monogamous couple. The president of the patient-advocacy organization opposing the law argued at a bioethics roundtable that “first of all, the talk about *eterologa* is always about sperm [donation]” (field notes, February 15, 2004). She added that egg donation is rarely discussed because “of the much stronger atavistic fear that the genetic patrimony of the father might be adulterated” (field notes, February 25, 2004). The language naturalizes a particular form of the family, one based on a history of institutionalized patriarchy.

These terms also point to a related aspect of questions of heterogeneity and homogeneity: the policing of racial boundaries in the context of Italy’s increased immigration. Politicians aligned themselves with a natural social order. The xenophobic party Lega Nord opposed assisted fertilization equating the “destruction of the natural family” with “the invasion of immigrants” (Savoini 2000). This fear of “racial” heterogeneity in family making was also at play in the debates around the ban of “heterologous” fertilization. During the campaign for a referendum to overturn the assisted reproduction law, Italian Health Minister Girolamo Sirchia warned: “To overturn the law would mean a return to the chaos that preceded it, which saw white couples giving birth to black babies” (Casadio 2004). A gynecologist used a similar example at a political roundtable debate as he argued that “we cannot let doctors do amazing things, such as having a Russian woman give birth to a Chinese baby” (Doctor Foerli, field notes, February 25, 2004).

CHASING EUROPE, SECURING SOCIAL COHESION

Our research has traced the contradictions and shifting logics of reproductive and population politics as key tools of social cohesion and as core markers of modernity in contemporary Italy. As we followed parliamentary debates, media coverage, and public reactions connected to the assisted reproduction law, and compared these with discussions related to the baby-bonus law, two similarities became strikingly clear: Both policies sought to rejuvenate family norms. And in both cases, policymakers used modernity as a weapon of the state to exert control over Italian fertility practices. Meanwhile, immigrants were ever implicated, carefully excluded, or precariously included. We observed how circulating discourses constitute a form of what we have called “social Viagra.” The process of policymaking is fertile to the extent that it generates discourses: Talk and text pump life into the nation, but not just any form of life. Furthermore, only certain life forms, even DNA strands, qualify.

We identified numeration itself as the social Viagra at work in the context of low fertility. Investigations into the passage of a pronatalist policy—the baby bonus—reveal policymakers’ framings of problems and solutions in scientific terms, as they drew heavily on experts and scientific “facts” from demography and economics so as to legitimate and, indeed, make politically possible a call for policy interventions to remedy low fertility. Debates surrounding family policy depicted reproductive trends and technologies as posing a cultural and economic threat to the nation. Couching the problem in economic terms, then, became a strategy for wrapping policy in a cloak of neutrality (after Shore and Wright 1997). Furthermore, our analysis showed leading politicians’ attempts to boost fertility rates in selective ways, such as in the exclusion of women who are not European citizens from the baby-bonus benefit. State-sanctioned experts succeeded in a war of position, enriching state authority to win new political terrain.

The productive effects of pronatalist political and media discourses appear also to be at work in the assisted reproduction legislation and its debates, suggesting a chase for Europe and a related fragile modernity in need of fortification. The law served as an indicator of Italy's modernity relative to the status of women, thus pointing to the centrality of gender and reproduction as markers of modernity. Moreover, women's bodies and their regulation through reproductive policy emerged in the debates as a key site at which the boundary between the West and the “Rest” is constructed, negotiated, and maintained. Charges that the legislation takes Italy out of Europe and puts it in the company of countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Camera dei Deputati 2002a) reveal a widespread awareness that membership in the European Union requires more than making the economic cut: It is also a cultural and symbolic standard of modernity that defines who is and who is not European.

In tracing modernity's shifting tropes in the context of Italian discourses on low fertility and the family, we have turned our anthropological gaze “part-way home” (Cole 1977) on a nation-state that officially belongs to Western Europe and the G-8 but appears perpetually concerned with its own backwardness vis-à-vis other “more Western” countries. Now that the “Rest” is in the West (after Hall 1992), the stakes of modernity and the importance of reason have gained renewed urgency. As such, this project contributes to understanding a heterogeneous Europe where the project of modernity is not finished but is ever fragile (after Roseberry 1994). Indeed, our ethnographic investigation related to family and fertility policies brings into relief the terms of the state's attempt to reproduce moral, modern “European” subjects. Whether and to what extent such policies successfully “educate” modern subjects to conform to specified standards—to extend Foucault's notion of “biopower” (1978:139)—or whether and how people reinterpret these manifestations of political education remain questions for future study.

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NOTES

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1. Italian demographers disagree as to whether a delayed exit from the family is the issue as young people from European countries with a higher fertility rate leave home earlier but have the first child at a similar age as their Italian counterparts. Gianpiero Dalla Zuanna (letter to author, October 24, 2004) argues that the difference lies in the lower probability that Italians will have a second or third child.
2. Pronatalism under the fascist regime included coercive as well as incentive measures. The regime changed abortion from a crime against the person to a crime against the race and nation. Contraception and information about it were illegal. The regime's pronatalist drive was also expressed through propaganda about motherhood. See de Grazia 1992, Horn 1994, Ipsen 1996, Krause 1994, Passerini 1987, and Snowden 2006.
3. Anthropologists and demographers continue to grapple with satisfactory explanations for Italy's low fertility rate, building on the Princeton European Fertility Project, which concluded that the timing of fertility decline did not correlate well with economic development or demographic variables, thereby disproving a hypothesis that fertility decline coincided with modernization (Coale and Watkins 1986). This failure led to an interest in cultural setting; however, vague and reified notions of “culture” have plagued demographic research (Kertzer 1995:31–32, 43–48; see Schneider and Schneider 1996 and Kertzer 1995:34 for explanations of differential, historic fertility decline).
4. We conducted a keyword search in the LexisNexis Academic database. Available to us were two dailies: the centrist *La Stampa* and the financial *Il Sole 24 Ore*.
5. A number of Health Ministry directives governed access to assisted reproduction in public hospitals, for example, Circolare Ministeriale Degan, 1985, and Circolare Donat Cattin, n. 19, April 27, 1987. The Italian Medical Association's code of conduct issued its own regulations in 1995: Article 42 Codice Deontologico Federazione Nazionale degli Ordini dei Medici Chirurghi e degli Odontoiatri, approved October 10, 1998.
6. Activists organized a national referendum to amend the law, but their efforts failed. In a June 2005 follow-up visit to Milan during the campaign to overturn the law, Marchesi found that most people complained of not understanding the technical ballot questions. Additionally, the Vatican weighed heavily on the campaign arguing for the rights of the embryo and encouraging Italians to boycott the referendum. This strategy was aimed at ensuring that the referendum would fail to meet the required quorum of 50.1 percent of eligible voters. The magnitude of the referendum defeat surprised opponents of the law: Only 25.9 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots. Many commentators, public and private, read this result as a political and symbolic victory for the Vatican and an indication that the balance of Italy's secular and religious powers may be tipping in St. Peter's favor.

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