

The Social Risk of Low Fertility in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the low fertility phenomenon in Taiwan and argues that the low fertility problem can be identified as a type of new social risk. Existing studies on new social risks tend to focus on the social risks that have negative influences on individuals but ignore those that have more negative influences on the whole society than individuals, such as low fertility problem. This paper illustrates how the Taiwanese government recognises low fertility as a social risk and how such recognition facilitated the recent development of policies that support families and children.

Keywords: Low Fertility, New Social Risk, Population Policies, Taiwan, Work-Family Balance Policies

INTRODUCTION

Managing social risks is one of the important goals of social policies (Esping-Andersen, 1999). Nevertheless, it appears that social risks have shown significant changes in the past decades. During the period after Second World War, the main social risks were recognised as interruptions of employment due to retirement, unemployment, disability, sickness, and widowhood (Taylor-Gooby, 2004). However, with the changes of social, economic, and demographic circumstances, many scholars have pointed out that there has been a dramatic change in social risk structure in post-industrial society (Bonoli, 2007; Esping-Andersen, 1999; Huber & Stephens, 2006; Taylor-Gooby, 2004).

Although many countries have faced similar trends of post-industrial transitions

and challenges, the social risks and problems in every welfare system are not necessarily identical. Since social risks derive from idiosyncratic national contexts with distinct institutions, political structures, and policy discourses, these post-industrial challenges could be translated into different problems in different backgrounds (Pierson, 2001; Prior & Sykes, 2001; Taylor-Gooby, 2004). Under different institutional arrangements, some welfare systems may be more vulnerable to some post-industrial changes. Therefore, the pattern of new social risks in different countries could be very different. Moreover, the identification of social risks could involve a process of social construction and interpretation between many different policy actors in the society (Cox, 2001; Mehta, 2011). Thus, in the circumstances with very different compositions of policy actors and

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perspectives, the types and extent of social risks or problems recognised by policy makers could be accordingly very different.

This diverse social risk structure in different contexts elicits two questions. Firstly, although some scholars such as Taylor-Gooby (2004) and Bonoli (2006) have indicated several types of new social risks in post-industrial society, the concept, definition, and consequences of these new social risks are mostly originated from the studies on Western welfare states (Aust & Bonker, 2004; Bonoli, 2006; Huber & Stephens, 2006; Larsen & Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Timonen, 2004). Given the diversities in social, economic, political, and demographic structure between different countries, it is debatable whether the welfare systems outside the Western welfare states share the same new social risks. Apart from the types of new social risks indicated in existing literature, do these countries outside the Western world have other type of new social risks? In order to gain a more extensive comprehension of new social risks and corresponding policies, it is crucial to examine prominent problems in other societies to explore this issue. As low fertility is a very serious issue in many East Asian countries including Taiwan, this paper attempts to take Taiwan as a case to examine whether low fertility problem in Taiwan can be identified as a type of new social risks.

Secondly, previous new social risk studies tend to focus on the influences of new social risks on some individuals or social groups. These studies indicated that there are some groups who are more exposed to the threats of new social risks, such as working women, families with young children, young people, and low-skilled workers. Although these groups may have more incentives to promote new policies that address new social risks, in general their capacity to influence policy making tends to be lower. Thus, the pressures of the government to formulate new policies to address new social risks are accordingly lower (Bonoli, 2006). Nevertheless, the development of new social risk policies seems not always to reflect the political power of new social risk groups. Tak-

ing the development of work-family balance policies in Taiwan as an example, the state intervention in childcare and leave policies in Taiwan has shown significant reinforcement in the past ten years (Tsai, 2011b). However, the political power of the direct beneficiaries of these policies such as working women or families with children did not really show dramatic increase during this period. In this case, how can policy analysts explain the changes of these work-family balance policies?

The aim of this paper is to address these two research questions. First, can low fertility be identified as a new social risk in the context of Taiwan? Second, given that the political power of new social risk groups (including working women and families with young children) in Taiwan did not show significant changes, why did work-family balance policies in Taiwan still show quick development in the last decade? In order to explore the two issues, this paper will firstly examine the fertility phenomenon in Taiwan. The second half will illustrate how the general public and policy actors in Taiwan understand and interpret the low fertility phenomenon. Finally, the paper will return to the discussions on the two research questions.

SEARCHING FOR 'NEW' NEW SOCIAL RISK?

With the transition from industrial society to post-industrial society in many countries, some scholars have suggested the concept of 'new social risks' to distinguish the difference of social risks between the two different stages (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Taylor-Gooby, 2004). According to Taylor-Gooby's definition, the term 'new social risks' refers to the risks which people encounter in their lives resulting from the transition to a post-industrial society (Taylor-Gooby, 2004, p. 3). Based on this definition, Taylor-Gooby (2004) identified a few types of new social risks which include difficulties in balancing work and family life and changing labour market risks. Changing labour markets risks can be further divided into three types:

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