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## Special Issue: Anthropology & Medicine, "Irrational reproduction: new intersections of politics, gender, race, and class across the north-south divide"

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By Aaron Seaman

The current issue of [\*Anthropology & Medicine\*](#) is a special issue entitled, "Irrational reproduction: new intersections of politics, gender, race, and class across the north-south divide". In [their introduction to the issue](#), Elizabeth L. Krause and Silvia De Zordo write:

"This special issue reveals how rationalities concerned with reproductive and sexual bodies arise and circulate over historic time and across social spaces. Despite wildly different contexts, remarkable similarities crosscut the 'global North' and 'global South'. The papers draw attention to the ways in which policies and practices differ in their specifics yet also unpredictably mirror one another in general ways. As these biopolitical rationalities change over time, new tactics, truths, and moral regimes emerge. In parallel, they transform subjectivities and foment strategies of negotiation, contestation, and resistance.

...

"One of the most salient global shifts in the past decades stems from trends of declining fertility. Population policies targeted at reducing births have waned. Given that those policies were promoted in the guise of modernity, development, and linear notions of progress (Greenhalgh 1995), one might imagine that debates over reproductive practices would have largely vanished. Instead, the tired neo-Malthusian key has shifted to a neoliberal register in which reproductive politics aim at defending, granting, and enhancing individual or collective rights and wellbeing. These include an intensification of the rights of the unborn and a deepening of economic and social inequalities. The papers collected in this issue attest to the myriad ways in which different biopolitical rationalities strive to discipline knowledge, embodied practices, and 'life as such,' meaning life understood as how it is 'lived through a body (not only through cells) and as a society (not

only as species)' (Fassin 2009, 48). They also show how individuals struggle to satisfy their reproductive desires – to have, to accept, or to avoid having children – and to embrace, question, or contest expert interventions and surveillance. Paradoxes abound.”

### [Irrational non-reproduction? The ‘dying nation’ and the postsocialist logics of declining motherhood in Poland](#)

*Joanna Mishtal*

Polish birthrates during the state socialist period, 1948–1989, stayed above replacement level but since 1989 fell dramatically to one of the lowest in Europe, at 1.29 in 2010. The Polish Catholic Church and the newly-elected nationalist government of Lech Wałęsa reacted by escalating pronatalist rhetoric calling on women to increase childbearing in the name of economic and nationalist causes. Reflecting the renewed dominance of the Church, Wałęsa implemented restrictions on family planning, including abortion, contraception, and sex education, justifying them in moral and demographic terms. Plummeting fertility has been portrayed by the Church, media, and state as dangerous and unreasonable – a sign of Polish women’s rejection of motherhood and the embrace of selfish priorities. Simultaneously however, the state cut back motherhood-friendly policies established by the socialist regime, including subsidized childcare, maternity leave, and healthcare. This paper draws on 19 months of fieldwork between 2000 and 2007, using interviews with 55 women in four healthcare clinics in Gdańsk area, and participant-observation at the social services offices in Krakow. This paper shows that far from irrational rejection of motherhood, Polish middle-class women are guided by pragmatic reasons when delaying parenthood in order to navigate the new political landscape marked by job insecurity and gendered discrimination in employment. Yet, rather than implementing work-family reconciliation policies that have stimulated fertility elsewhere in Europe, the Church and state insist on blaming women for ‘irrational’ non-reproduction, thus betraying a lack of political commitment to gender equity in employment, reproductive health, and in the family.

### [Reproducing Italians: contested biopolitics in the age of ‘replacement anxiety’](#)

*Milena Marchesi*

In national and international discourses, Italians are often represented as a greying population failing to reproduce itself. Italian women are targeted for their very low birth rates, while migrant women are scrutinized for their 'excessive' fertility and abortion rates. These demographic concerns over differential reproduction reflect 'replacement anxiety' about the below-replacement rates of Italians and the replacement of Italians by immigrants. Demographic anxieties coalesce with the intensifying of Catholic 'vitapolitics' manifesting in the paradox of pro-natalist interventions coexisting with the curtailment of fertility-enhancing reproductive technologies. The children of migrants emerge in some population discourses as a threat rather than a contribution to the reproduction of the nation. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic research in Milan, this paper examines how reproduction in contemporary Italy has emerged as a contested social, political, and moral issue that invests Italian and migrant women in different ways, engendering different forms and terms of resistance and contestation. On what terms are subjects governed and called upon to govern themselves to be more 'rational' and 'responsible' reproducers of the nation? What subjectivities and local responses are engendered by the politics of reproduction in Italy? As different rationalities and notions of responsible reproduction circulate, ethnographic research sheds light on how anxieties over low birth rates are reappropriated and redeployed against the state, suggesting that subjects are not so easily governable by population and reproductive discourses. This research contributes to the literature on critical demography and the politics of reproduction and migration in the new Europe.

### [Islamic logics, reproductive rationalities: family planning in northern Pakistan](#)

*Emma Varley*

This paper explores the use of Islamic doctrine and jurisprudence by family planning organizations in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of northern Pakistan. It examines how particular interpretations of Islam are promoted in order to encourage fertility reductions, and the ways Muslim clerics, women and their families react to this process. The paper first discusses how Pakistan's demographic crisis, as the world's sixth most populous nation, has been widely blamed on under-funding for reproductive health services and wavering political commitment to family planning. Critics have

called for innovative policy and programming to counter 'excessive reproduction' by also addressing socio-cultural and religious barriers to contraceptive uptake. Drawing on two years of ethnographic research, the paper examines how family planning organizations in Gilgit-Baltistan respond to this shift by employing moderate interpretations of Islam that qualify contraceptive use as a 'rational' reproductive strategy and larger families as 'irrational'. However, the use of Islamic rhetoric to enhance women's health-seeking agency and enable fertility reductions is challenged by conservative Sunni ulema (clergy), who seek to reassert collective control over women's bodies and fertility by deploying Islamic doctrine that honors frequent childbearing. Sunnis' minority status and the losses incurred by regional Shia-Sunni conflicts have further strengthened clerics' pronatalist campaigns. The paper then analyses how Sunni women navigate the multiple reproductive rationalities espoused by 'Islamized' family planning and conservative ulema. Although Islamized family planning legitimizes contraceptive use and facilitates many women's stated desire for smaller families, it frequently positions women against the interests of family, community and conservative Islam.

[Programming the body, planning reproduction, governing life: the '\(ir-\) rationality' of family planning and the embodiment of social inequalities in Salvador da Bahia \(Brazil\)](#)

*Silvia De Zordo*

This paper examines family planning in Brazil as biopolitics and explores how the democratization of the State and of reproductive health services after two decades of military dictatorship (1964–1984) has influenced health professionals' and family planning users' discourses and practices. Do health professionals envisage family planning as a 'right' or do they conceive it, following the old neo-Malthusian rationale, as a 'moral duty' of poor people, whose 'irrational' reproduction jeopardizes the family's and the nation's well being? And how do their patients conceptualize and embody family planning? To answer these questions, this paper draws on 13 months of multi-sited ethnographic research undertaken between 2003 and 2005 in two public family planning services in Salvador da Bahia, where participant observation was undertaken and unstructured interviews were conducted with 11 health professionals and 70 family planning users, mostly low income black women. The paper examines how different bio-political rationalities operate in these

services and argues that the old neo-Malthusian rationale and the current, dominant discourse on reproductive rights, gender equality and citizenship coexist. The coalescence of different biopolitical rationalities leads to the double stigmatization of family planning users as 'victims' of social and gender inequalities and as 'irrational' patients, 'irresponsible' mothers and 'bad' citizens if they do not embody the neo-Malthusian and biomedical rationales shaping medical practice. However, these women do not behave as 'docile bodies': they tactically use medical and non-medical contraceptives not only to be good mothers and citizens, but also to enhance themselves and to attain their own goals.

### [The right to have a family: 'legal trafficking of children', adoption and birth control in Brazil](#)

*Andrea Cardarelli*

This paper focuses on one of the 'child-trafficking scandals' that occurred in Brazil in the 1990s. Ethnographic research was carried out between 2000 and 2001 within a movement of poor families formed in São Paulo to put pressure on the authorities to review the legal procedures that had led to their children being placed for national and international adoption. Fieldwork was supplemented by other data, including reports by legislative bodies, articles in the press, and case files involving the termination of parental rights. This paper explores views on international adoption among members of the Brazilian elites such as judges, agents in the field of child protection and journalists, in the context of old but persistent neo-Malthusian ideas. Although the Brazilian birth rate is now below the replacement level, it is still common to blame 'irresponsible' reproduction among the urban poor for violence in large cities. Drawing a parallel with the routine sterilization of women that prevailed for decades and was encouraged by Brazilian physicians, the paper examines how, in a 'struggle against poverty', judicial agents took it upon themselves to enforce 'birth control' through adoption, bypassing family consent and the law in the process. The paper concludes by arguing that discrimination against poor families who are viewed as disorganized, immoral and irresponsible – characteristics frequently associated with criminality by a sector of the elites – has contributed to the view that lower-class families do not have the right to bear children, or to keep them.

### [Reproductive governance in Latin America](#)

Lynn M. Morgan & Elizabeth F.S. Roberts

This paper develops the concept of reproductive governance as an analytic tool for tracing the shifting political rationalities of population and reproduction. As advanced here, the concept of reproductive governance refers to the mechanisms through which different historical configurations of actors – such as state, religious, and international financial institutions, NGOs, and social movements – use legislative controls, economic inducements, moral injunctions, direct coercion, and ethical incitements to produce, monitor, and control reproductive behaviours and population practices. Examples are drawn from Latin America, where reproductive governance is undergoing a dramatic transformation as public policy conversations are coalescing around new moral regimes and rights-based actors through debates about abortion, emergency contraception, sterilisation, migration, and assisted reproductive technologies. Reproductive discourses are increasingly framed through morality and contestations over ‘rights’, where rights-bearing citizens are pitted against each other in claiming reproductive, sexual, indigenous, and natural rights, as well as the ‘right to life’ of the unborn. The concept of reproductive governance can be applied to other settings in order to understand shifting political rationalities within the domain of reproduction.

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