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# Demography, Demographic Transition, Demographic Policies

Gérard-François Dumont



*The specter of “population explosion” is often invoked today and even to be convinced that it is possible to find in population growth the cause of poverty in many countries. In fact, abusive appeals to demography are often made to confer a kind of scientific justification on programs of action which have heavily ideological connotations. It is therefore necessary to keep in mind the findings of the science of population in order to understand the notably different situations, and to grasp the mechanisms which explain why and in what way demographic changes vary in time and space. These same findings call for an in-depth analysis of development policies. The science of population may be defined as a human and social science and cannot be restricted to just numbers and data. It is the fruit of historical observation and experience. But it criticizes false diagnoses which form the basis on which plans of action are built that are all the more unacceptable for their proposal of more or less openly coercive methods. Therefore, once kept free from any ideological manipulation, the science of population is called to clarify the processes of political decision-making whose first beneficiaries will be families and nations. (□ Birth Control and Demographic Implosion; Domestic Economy; Family and the Principle of Subsidiarity; Family and Sustainable Development; Demographic Implosion in Europe?; Imperfect and Iniquitous Laws; A New Model of a Welfare State; Responsible Parenthood)*

Demography, Demographic Transition and Demographic Policies are concepts which have precise and objective meanings. It is therefore good to reject the erroneous or ideological connotations that are too frequently given to them. These three terms are in general usage it seems since they are regularly used in the media. The meanings justifying their use, however, are frequently far from their scientific meaning. The

term “Demography” which objectively means the science of population, for instance, is often used to include other contents that notably can accept subjective meanings that go against the objective sense of the word. Sometimes it is suggested by the term “Demography” that it bears responsibility for the ills of humanity and poverty in certain countries and regions. Demography is in such cases relegated to use as a scapegoat: the

causes of the world's suffering have been found, "Demography". In other cases Demography is equated with an opaque mass of scientific information that is too obscure and indigestible to usefully contribute to our knowledge. Both the implicit meanings mentioned above reject the true meaning of demography.

### **"DEMOGRAPHY" AS A SCAPEGOAT**

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This rejection of the true meaning of Demography is used when one studies the failures in development in certain countries and the extent of world poverty. "Demography" is then tried and condemned as the ideal scapegoat. The low level of knowledge concerning demographic realities among the general public prevents most persons from denouncing abuses of the science of population.

For over a third of a century a truly ideological concept has been spread far and wide making Demography responsible for the world's ills. Two books which are most representative of this militant ideology each sold millions of copies in dozens of translations. The first book, The Population Bomb, was published in New York in 1971 and signed Paul Ehrlich. It capitalized on the fears of nuclear attack by one of the great military powers of the Cold War (USSR or USA) to invent a menace that he deemed extremely serious: population.

The prologue<sup>1</sup> of the book brutally introduced the question of a demographic danger by saying: "hundreds of millions of human beings will die of hunger in the years 1970-1980" and "nothing can now prevent an important increase in world mortality rates." This thesis was snatched up by the media around the world and continues to be largely shared by public opinion in developed countries even though events have continued on multiple occasions to disprove it.

Thus, contrary to the second affirmation from the prologue, since the 1970s the world's mortality rates have declined. In the years 1950-1955 the rate was 19.7 deaths per thousand inhabitants. In 1977 it fell to 11 per thousand; in 2000 we are at 9 per thousand. This decline in mortality took place despite the aging of the populations of the European and Far Eastern countries, the spread of new and unpredicted events such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the greater mortality from civil and military conflicts caused by the fall of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe and the former USSR. In other words, mortality rates have fallen systematically except in countries shaken by wars, politics (Russia, Romania), the new HIV/AIDS pandemic or, in industrialized countries that are ageing because of a decline in fertility.

As for mortality due to malnutrition or under nutrition corresponding to the

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1 P. EHRLICH, *la Bombe P*, Paris, Fayard, 1972, XVII.

first affirmation in the prologue, one must deplore it in certain regions of the planet during certain periods. The most intense mortality rates, however, are in no way due to the number of people, to “Demography” but to political situations. Thus, two of the greatest periods of increased mortality recorded since the 1970s are explained by catastrophic management on the part of the state. The most deadly took place in China during the “black years” 1968-1971 where increased mortality rates rose to the same level as the countries on the front lines of the First World War.<sup>2</sup> The increased collectivization of agriculture in the context of the program called “The Great Leap Forward” and the priority given to military investments provoked a food production crisis that the government tried to hide for a long time from world public opinion and then tried to blame on “agricultural calamities” when the world learned of the catastrophe.

A second case of intense mortality took place in North Korea where 3 million persons died of malnutrition between 1995 and 2000 out of a population estimated at 23 million inhabitants. The totalitarian politics of the country transformed it into an immense armed camp.<sup>3</sup> Autarchic collectivism prevented trade, disastrous economic choices and fierce repression completely

bankrupted the country.

As these two examples demonstrate, the great famines come notably from grave policy errors in the overseeing of food production. Other high death rates observed are caused by power struggles (as in the Iran-Iraq war, the civil war in Sudan, or the internal fights in Angola or Afghanistan) and not by “Demography”. Elsewhere, the art of deception using accepted terms is used to get media attention concerning famines organized by those in power in order to obtain aid money. This activity spread after the “success” achieved by the Ethiopian leaders who were able in this way to finance their war against Eritrea.<sup>4</sup>

Ehrlich views the “population bomb” as bad, not only for the third world, but also for the developed countries. He does not hesitate to compare demographic growth to a “cancer” which is worrisome for the entire planet, including the United States. He wrote: “We have to do population control at home (the United States).” These preceding affirmations, however, have no foundation whatsoever. One only has to recall the low population density of the United States and the considerable potential of its vast territory.

The second successful book that made “Demography” a scapegoat for the sufferings of humanity was the famous 1972 “Limits to Growth” Club of Rome report. This circulated the expression “Demographic Explosion” which is of-

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2 G.-F. DUMONT, *Les populations du monde*, Armand Colin, Paris 2004.

3 *Géopolitique de la faim*, Paris, PUF, Paris 2000

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4 Ibid.

ten seen as a synonym of Demography. Considering that demographic growth is “diabolical”, the report created and spread widely fears that continue, even today, to mask the true demographic situation.

The completely ideological approach of these two books and the many others they influenced enclose “demography” within descriptions of alarming numbers, explosive statistics and fear-inducing formulas. In the same vein of mythical demography one can call to mind the definitive judgement of one of the most famous men of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In November of 1991 Commander Cousteau declared to the *Courrier de l'Unesco*: “World population must stabilize and this entails the need to eliminate 350,000 persons a day.” This incredible phrase is equivalent to a call for genocide. Its author did not specify, by the way, if he counted on being one of those “eliminated”. The quote also shows that Cousteau was totally ignorant of demographic mechanisms, the logic of demographic transition and the effects of inertia that belong to the science of population.

## **POLITICAL BURDENS**

To present “Demography” as mathematically corresponding to poverty is a profound error. In reality the too many pockets of poverty existing in the world are not due to excess population but more commonly due to political causes. Let's take some examples: in Eu-

rope Russia has a Gross National Product (GNP) per capita that is less than one tenth that of Western Europe or the United States. It therefore must be classified as a developing country despite the considerable riches of its land and sub-soil and not because of its population which is moreover declining. Here is another example. Africa remains a continent with considerable economic possibilities: Primary goods, minerals, good soil quality in many regions... but this continent suffers from bad policies. Guinea is periodically ranked last in the yearly *World Human Development Report*. Is this caused by “Demography”? The report published in 1995 answered by posing the question: “Why is this country, which has such abundant natural resources, finding itself in this position?”<sup>5</sup> Knowing how much past political mistakes weakened the structure of the economy, the French daily *Le Monde* added: “Guinea has not finished paying for the 25 years of Sékou Touré's dictatorship. General Lansana Conté, Touré's successor, always refused to break with his predecessor while also taking great liberties with the rules of democracy.”<sup>6</sup>

Let us turn to Asia now. Among the poorest countries ranked by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is Burma, which is now known

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5 PNUD (UNDP), *Rapport mondial sur le développement humain*, Economica, Paris, 1995, 128.

6 *Le Monde*, 4-5 février 1996, 3.

as Myanmar. Did its poverty come from “Demography”, from a too large population compared to its resources? Absolutely not. Burma, like the land of many poor peoples in the world, has much potential. There are vast water resources, a fertile countryside, immense uncultivated areas, a great diversity of forests with noteworthy species, maritime access to huge fishing zones, a wide range of mineral resources (coal, iron, lead, copper, tin, tungsten, gold, silver, marble...) particularly rich mines of precious and semi-precious gems (rubies, sapphires, spinel, jade), oil and natural gas... The development failure of Burma, as in many other countries, is political and therefore has nothing to do with “Demography”.

In other words, as these examples show, the burden of many areas is not “Demography” but rather public policies which block development.

Contrary to the false logic of those who make “Demography” responsible for the ills of humanity, reality is quite different, whether one observes world population or the diverse populations of the world. On the one hand, the unique demographic growth of the last two centuries is not the product of Faustian magic: it is the result of considerable human progress which has managed to push down mortality to an extraordinary degree. In many countries infant mortality, maternal mortality and child/adolescent mortality have fallen by more than 95%. Consequently, life expectan-

cy at birth has more than doubled, and even tripled in some populations, reaching heights that our ancestors in the 18<sup>th</sup> century would have judged utopian and thus unattainable.

In any event, it is not very meaningful to speak about world population in its entirety. Continents, subcontinents, countries and even regions have major differences in population, birth rates, mortality rates, marriage rates, migration, etc. Any demographic calculation bearing exclusively on the adding together of different peoples having different and changing behaviors is of limited usefulness.

The human development that everyone hopes for in the 21<sup>st</sup> century partly depends on the political responses to demographic challenges. In the countries of the south, who should benefit from greater human resources, the essential point is the capacity of leaders to decide on and put into place policies that allow individuals to become agents of development. They must reject collectivist and misguided policies which recent history has shown to be failures, even when a country enjoys important natural resources.

## **A TRUE SOCIAL SCIENCE**

Even when the term “Demography” is not made responsible for humanities’ ills, it is threatened with another form of rejection. Demography is dismissed as being a discipline that only consists of an avalanche of unworkable numbers,

obscure quantitative figures lacking significance. Unfortunately this objection is partially justified by the way some demographers work. They limit the discipline to having a purely esoteric and statistical function.

The most common use of the word “Demography” in the ideological sense is in the often-used mistaken expression “Demographic Explosion” or as an ensemble of difficult to understand accounting figures. These two uses have nothing to do with the reality of *Demography, the science of population taking as its object the study of human collectivities*. Since its birth in 1662 and the publication of the major work by the Englishman John Graunt, *Natural and Political Observations*, Demography<sup>7</sup> is considered a social science. This first scientific work of Demography studied mortality in London “in relation to the government, religion, commerce, the air, ... and the changes in the said city”, as stated in the sub-title of the book. From the first, therefore, Demography was not simply statistics about humanity on the earth. If that were the case, it would be according to Alfred Sauvy a mere “enumeration of men” and not a scientific discipline.<sup>8</sup> Studying demographic events (principally births, marriages,

deaths and migrations) Demography takes as its objective among the sciences to extract from its area of research interpretive schemes, or even laws, which will improve our knowledge. With this goal it gathers quantitative data, but comprehending their evolution and interactions with political, economic or cultural realities is only realized if the quantitative data is studied with qualitative approaches. An example would be the demographic analysis of the differences in female and male life expectancy according to societies. This leads to knowledge concerning cultural differences in the equal or unequal treatment regarding the dignity and status of women.<sup>9</sup>

In reality, the science of population is at the heart of the base of life and the actions of men. By studying migration it considers the reasons which push men to leave their land of origin or to return there. In the study of birth rates the conditions surrounding the creation of new human beings are included. In examining marriage rates Demography asks questions about human love. Analysis of mortality rates includes the study of the context in which the mystery of death takes place. Securing quantitative data is a necessary condition for the study of Demography because the information thus obtained can be used by other fields of knowledge and allows

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7 1662 is the year of the science of population's birth, but the neologism “Demography” was only coined in 1855 by the Frenchman Achille Guillard.

8 A. SAUVY, *Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France*, 1959.

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9 For instance, female life expectancy is particularly improved in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban regime.

us to know and understand the great adventure of human societies.

## **THE FRAMEWORK OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION**

The definition of the Demographic Transition sheds light on what was stated above. In fact for an objective scientist the Demographic Transition<sup>10</sup> is a framework that allows for a greater understanding and interpretation of the dynamics specific to different populations. It is absolutely not a theory since its formulation comes only from the description of historical events and is the result of experience. The Demographic Transition is a framework that presents the mechanisms of the period during which contemporary populations, notably thanks to progress in medicine, pass from demographic regimes characterized by high mortality rates and high birth rates to regimes with low mortality rates consequently followed by lower birth rates. The universal character of the passage of contemporary populations through the Demographic Transition cannot be contested since it is observed on all continents, including those where some had denied the possibility of conformity to the framework such as Latin America, Asia, North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Nevertheless, this Demographic Transition framework has two frequent-

ly omitted specificities and one ambiguity which may be linked to its title. The first specificity is its calendar which varies considerably from country to country. Frequently people do not understand why Western Europe has long since finished its transition and why the Indian subcontinent has not yet completed its own. One forgets that Western Europe began its transition at the end of the XVIII century and the Indian subcontinent started in the 1920s. To compare the demographic evolution of India with that of Germany in 2001 makes little sense. The true comparison would look at India in 2001 and Germany at the end of the XIX century. To compare the growth of China and Great Britain in the XX century is to juxtapose two different demographic periods. One should rather compare these two countries during the most intense period of their transition. This would put China in the XX century next to Great Britain in the XIX century. In this case the analysis shows that the English transition was more intense than the Chinese one since the population of Great Britain grew four times larger in the XIX century and China's only tripled in size during the XX century. One should therefore know how to contextualize the historical demographic evolution of each country.

The second specificity of each Demographic Transition relates to its intensity, that is to say the relationship between the number of inhabitants in

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10 G.-F. DUMONT, *Le Monde et les hommes, Les grandes évolutions démographiques*, Litec, Paris, 1995.



a territory at the end of the transition and just as it began. In general, the relationship is greater when the transition is shorter. A population that rapidly passes through the transition in less than a half century, like Taiwan, South Korea, or Tunisia, increases more during this period than a population which took a century or more to go through this same transition period. Since the countries of the South benefited rapidly from the medical progress developed in the North, their lowered mortality rates came very quickly and thus their transition was more intense.

### **FROM THE MYTH OF AUTOMATIC DEMOGRAPHIC STABILITY...**

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Even though the scientific definition of the "Demographic Transition" is very clear, what the expression means is sometimes unclear because of the frequent connotation it is given. Instead of looking at it as it is, a period of time separating different demographic regimes, some consider it to be the passage from a stationary demographic regime to a stable demographic regime. This prevailing idea is that before the transition a high mortality rate balanced a high birth rate and therefore the populations of the world evolved in stability. The history of populations demonstrates this is not true. Before the considerable progress in life expectancy due to the extraordinary advances in economics and medicine in the last two centuries, the

world saw the most diverse demographic changes, notably as a function of the individual political contexts of the regions in each period.<sup>11</sup> The transition therefore does not put an end to a self-balancing demographic system because this never existed.

Just as the idea of past stability is hard to put to rest, it is often thought, even though this is absent from the analysis of those who developed the framework of the transition, that the end of the transition establishes a demographic regime where mortality rates and birth rates balance each other bringing long-lasting demographic stability.<sup>12</sup> This idea of a final equilibrium is at the heart of what are called "Demographic Policies" in international reports. Since there is an ideal of stability to be attained, we might as well try to arrive there as fast as possible. To accelerate the timetable by coercive means is therefore desirable and leads to the justification of Demographic Policies advocated by the heads of some international organizations.

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11 G.-F. Dumont, *Les populations du monde*.

12 Strangely, this false reasoning is still present in the United Nations, *World Population Prospects 2000*, New York 2001. This publication maintains as its medium variant hypothesis, the one deemed most likely to occur, fertility rates of 2.1 children per woman when many countries are below this rate and have been so for decades in the case of some European or Asiatic countries.

### **...TO COERCIVE DEMOGRAPHIC POLICIES**

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One often understands Demographic Policies in a restrictive sense designating policies aiming to decrease fertility which, without any deep study, is considered *a priori* to be too high. Following this logic, in agreement with the writings of Ehrlich and the Club of Rome, Mrs. Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India, decided in 1976 to enlarge a very coercive Demographic Policy in India. In a great blunder, the authorities in India thought, already in 1952, that to establish an authoritarian Demographic Policy and western family planning structures in a country with an inadequate health care network was a good idea. The population could not understand why it was necessary to limit fertility to two children when infant, adolescent and maternal mortality rates were still so high. In 1976 the increasingly coercive character of the Indian Demographic Policy, which was applied differently according to castes, only served to highlight social inequalities. At the moment where the birthrate had started to decline, in compliance with the Demographic Transition framework, the coercive Demographic Policy caused something of a boomerang effect. For example, sterilization, which became almost mandatory for a certain time, was done under such poor health conditions that there were at times fatal complications. As a consequence, the

government of the Punjab was forced to decide to pay an indemnity to the surviving spouse. The increased population control done after the declaration of the state of emergency provoked violent reactions and the defeat of the Congress Party in the March 1977 elections. The most perspicacious specialists consider that it would have been more wise to avoid this “policy of blind voluntarism.”

Similar mistakes were made in other countries. Nevertheless, experience shows that a balanced change in the age pyramids is always desirable. To brutalize it, for example, as the Chinese governments have done<sup>13</sup> brings no additional advantage and leads on the contrary to upheavals that may do damage.

### **A REALITY THAT IS RARELY CLARIFIED**

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In fact, in its scientific definition the expression “Demographic Policy” is not only about a policy trying to reduce fertility by the most efficient means, including abortion. *Demographic Policy is defined as the decisions and actions taken as a whole by the public and parapublic authorities that have demographic effects.* A health policy which increases life spans has demographic consequences. A policy which favors the welcoming of new life has an influence on the age pyramid. A land zoning policy can have an

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13 G.-F. DUMONT, *Les populations du monde*.

effect on the geography of settlement. To the contrary, policies favoring military spending rather than health policy or technological progress, those that fiscally penalize couples with children or allow euthanasia, equally have demographic consequences.

Demographic Policy must be analyzed in the same way as Economic Policy or Foreign Policy. It does, however, have one unique quality with regard to other public policies: most policies in democratic countries are explicitly stated. Demographic Policy is frequently more implicit than explicit. A government does not explicitly state that it is periodically lowering subsidies for children in order to reduce the relative income of families and finally lowering the birthrate. A government does not declare that it is legalizing abortion in order to reduce births, nevertheless we can mathematically calculate the reduction in the birthrate caused by pregnancies ending before term in abortion. A government does not say that its Malthusian housing policy tends to harm expansion and turnover in the housing market, which makes access to housing more difficult for those wishing to found families. A government that decides to create a contract with social and fiscal advantages for homosexual couples will not admit that these billions going to these persons are the same amount of money taken away from the policy for the family. A government does not say that very restrictive city zoning rules in-

volving long and costly procedures are a material and financial obstacle to the construction of housing for new families. Maintaining or increasing taxes on the sale or purchase of homes financially penalizes families which would need to buy larger homes as they grow, but governments do not admit this to be the case.

Furthermore, the public authorities of the State are not the only ones to implicitly or explicitly carry out Demographic Policies: it is also true of international bodies, regional entities and the different institutions that influence demographic events by their decisions, their rhetoric, and the spreading of ideas or beliefs.

The terms Demography, Demographic Transition and Demographic Policy are concepts with a definite and objective content; it is therefore needed to put aside the ideological and erroneous meanings which too often are ascribed to them.