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Gérard-François Dumont

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Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century : the Thought of Alfred Sauvy

(Extract from *POPULATION ET AVENIR*, n°708, May-June 2012, p.3)

by Gérard-François DUMONT

The state of health of France is not at its best. Its strong points – such as the diversity of its territory or its numerous local initiatives – are often badly known or badly recognized, or even judged in a negative way. Its handicaps, however, are well known, from functional illiteracy and unemployment to indebtedness and lack of intermediate enterprises. In such a context, what kind of ideas can best help us understand the present and build the future? Would a humanistic approach inspired by Alfred Sauvy's work be helpful?

A method towards...

Alfred Sauvy was born in 1898 in the French Western Pyrenees. In 1922, after graduating from the famous Ecole Polytechnique, he was appointed as a deputy statistician in the French Statistics Department (Statistique générale de la France) where he was first given the boring but essential task of collecting data. He belonged to a generation of engineers/economists marked by their youthful memories of the impoverished France of the post-WW1 period and its Malthusian and deflationist reflexes. He progressively joined networks interested in issues of expertise, economic data and statistics. In his view, knowledge must be based on the observation of facts and their analysis. Hence, he dissociated himself from the traditional political economic thought, writing for instance that “too many economists build models which would be perfect if man did not exist”.

Without abandoning economics, but inspired by the importance he attributed to human action in favour of the common good, Alfred Sauvy started to delve more deeply into demographic issues; yet at the time, in 1946, population studies were still “a primitive science, without scholars or masters, nurtured only by amateurs – in the best sense of the word – or touched upon on occasion by economists, statisticians, ethnographers”¹. Thus, he became the “Master of Demography”, a status recognised by the Collège de France when, in 1959, this prestigious institution created for him a Chair of Social Demography, its first use of this denomination.

A witness of the achievements of modern medicine, Alfred Sauvy, realising how an objective scientific approach allows

one to understand reality and make enlightened decisions, dedicated himself to the mission of sharing knowledge, as he rejected the numerous political decisions based on an ignorance both “well sustained” and “pushed further than that of Molière's doctors”².

He favoured a four-step method. The first step is data collection, followed by diagnosis, to identify issues. During the third phase, prognoses or conditional prospects are established in order to aid reflection.

... enlightened action

Finally, the fourth and last step aims at enlightening actions. Our expert-man of action was anything but a technocrat. On the one hand, he considered that his mission was to inform politicians of all descriptions, with analyses based on a precise apprehension of the facts. On the other hand, Alfred Sauvy launched a vast work of vulgarisation as he felt it just as important to offer useful insights to all citizens. With this objective, he wrote numerous books and published regular articles in the most diverse periodicals, of the national, regional and specialist press.

Alfred Sauvy relied on his method and on a multi-disciplinary approach (economics, demography, sociology, history) of man within society to fend off Malthusianism in all its forms. He demonstrated the inanity of simplistic arguments concerning the supposed relationships between technical progress and unemployment, the problems of retirement, the issues raised by immigration etc. His *General Theory of Population* is punctuated with comments on the obvious errors of judgment he discerned in the behaviour of individuals, social groups and political persons. With regard to old age pensions, he often deplored, especially in the 70s, the lack of a demographic culture among his contemporaries who, taking no account of the implications of a careful scrutiny of age pyramids, proposed naïve projects: “You cannot win an economic war by concentrating on easing the circumstances of all citizens and ensuring their peaceful retirement, at as early an age as possible.” Placing the consideration of employment above all others, his work *La Machine et le Chômage* (Machines and Unemployment) published in 1980 gave him the opportunity to describe the complex relationships between technical progress and employment: unemployment mainly originates in the ignorance of needs yet to be satisfied, in economic Malthusianism, in the insufficient elasticity of supply, threatened by rigidities, whether already existing or created by nefarious dogmatic measures, overlooking the facts.

The interest of Alfred Sauvy's method is to help us reflect on current issues and the way to resolve them. Solutions cannot be found without the observation and measurement of economic, demographic and social phenomena over a long period, as well as their comparison and the bringing together of different disciplinary approaches³. ●

(Translation: Sylvie Vanston)

KEY WORDS

Sauvy (Alfred)
Demography
Methodology
Population studies
Economics
Sociology

1. *Population*, volume 1, n°1, Jan-March 1946. Though unsigned, this text was obviously written by Alfred Sauvy, who created this journal.

2. Alfred Sauvy, *La vie en plus*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1981

3. An Association bearing the name of Alfred Sauvy has just been created, aiming at the study, dissemination and continuation of his work. It can be contacted by mail, care of *Population & Avenir*, 35 Avenue MacMahon, F-75017 Paris, or by e-mail to: jean-pierre.baux@wanadoo.fr.

