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Global disorder: An important agenda for 21st century population studies

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1. Demography and population matters in the future of humanity

Demography is in some countries a branch of statistics. In others it might have a place of its own in the context of social sciences, engaged in scientific theorising not only on methods but also on the substance of its matter. Irrespective of such differences, as a science demography appears virtually everywhere to develop in a dialectic relation to development and politics - demographers are often called in to give support both to politicians and to planners. How demographers handle the delicate balancing between autonomous critical science and policy-serving applied science, has varied over time and given distinct marks on its articulation among other social sciences.

Ever since the days of Thomas Malthus, demographers have in varying degrees concerned themselves with the destiny of humankind. Discourses on over-population are to a great deal carried by demographers. Rarely would one hear a demographer object to being associated with that type of exercises, in his/her profession as demographer. But, as Joel Cohen (1996) is one of the best to have shown, population and sustainability issues are among the most complex on the agenda today, and issues which require the contributions of a very broad range of scientists to be discussed with some sense.

Malthus' works were temporarily overtaken by the momentum of industrialisation and global expansion, which appeared to invalidate his theses from the time they were published. However, whatever the historical viability of his theses on population, he contributed to pinning the population/resources issue firmly on the agenda of the 20th century. By then, the globalisation process which had only started in the Malthus times had matured; the slave trade had been replaced by colonial economic domination in an increasingly globalised European economy, rapidly extending over the world with new means of communication in the post-colonial era. While Malthus generally contextualised his demographic dynamics with the nation, the 20th century Western demographers looked at the whole world. And they discovered that the "great demographic transition", which had been a demographic push on 19th century European economies comparable to that of its counterpart in East Asia in the late 20th century, was starting up in the colonies, but in forms that promised to be even greater.

Today, the world population is four times its size in 1900 and more than twice its size in 1950. All serious projections show the same thing; that the increase will continue for several decades, and that neither the time of levelling out nor the maximum population size can be predicted with . This historically unique population increase is still modest compared to the speed of the simultaneous growth in production of commodities, international transport, movements of people and average material consumption. The multiplier effect of these two - the number of people and the material impacts of the average person - is already so heavy that global climate and weather conditions are changing. Local ecosystem change is equally global, and food support systems begin to show visible signs of their limits.

These developments have led to an almost universal consensus that a halt to further population increase is necessary - a consensus that is compounded by a whole series of other priority issues: Containing consumption or population numbers? Containing population increase where? Containing by what means? - and so on, issues which inevitably clash with class interests, which have to take in human rights and individual freedom, which are negotiated in the framework of competition between nations.

2. The demographic transition, demography and today's world

Human history continually repeats the same paradox; a growing historical understanding of what social and economic change is about, and a recurring tendency to bypass that understanding in attempts to steer such development through policy. This was the case of the "socialist experiments" unfolding within the decolonisation process and which aimed at constructing a state of the workers even where there was no working class (Egerö 1990). This was - and in part still is - the case of the "population industry" (Demeny 1988) which, by about the time the theoretical groundwork was made on the Demographic Transition, took shape in the search for ways to modify the very transition itself by means of policy. While in relation to Europe the demographic transition was seen as an integral part of a great historical shift affecting all aspects of society, in relation to the colonies its progression was deemed necessary to address through "social engineering" or policies and practices through the state.

If there is one central finding of the ambitious European Fertility Project of the 1960s, it is the realisation of how complex the demographic transition is as a process. Judging from the way the findings were summarised by Ansley Coale, it produced more of a framework for further research than any clarification of the mechanisms behind the process.¹ The strength of the "bypass" tendency of state power holders is well demonstrated by the very fact that such insights were never systematically brought to bear on the "population industry" and its strategies for demographic change in non-European societies.

It could certainly be argued that colonisation itself was such an extreme case of external influence, that nothing like the organic dynamics of change in institutions and society in Europe was ever possible. Warren Thomson's (1946) note about "the Malthusian dilemma of all colonialism" may even have served to reinforce this tendency.² In addition, the early formulations of the demographic transition paid much theoretical attention to possible links between mortality falls and fertility declines. The absence of any such trends in the colonies/post-colonial states did cast a shade of doubt over the demographic transition as such, at least in its general theoretical value (Chesnais 1992, 2).

The strong engagement of the "population industry" (which included many demographers) in the issue of policy-driven fertility reduction in poor non-European countries was driven by a mixture of motives, not all of them scientifically sound. The result was that in respect of "Third World demography", much of the scientific integrity and rigour got lost, and the science took on a character of support to policy, or a "policy science". The process is well described in a range of contributions (see eg Demeny 1988, Grimes 1998, Hodgson 1983, Hodgson 1988). The only field of demography that systematically gained during this period was methods development; from techniques for measurement and estimation to models for approximation or simulation of reality. In all other respects, the science came to suffer.

By engaging in research guided by already formulated official policies, demography came to be marginalised by social scientists engaged in defending the value of autonomy of science.

¹ Coale (1974) summarized the findings in three points: a) fertility must be within the calculus of conscious choice; b) reduced fertility must be advantageous; c) effective techniques of fertility reduction must be available.

² Thompson showed how the colonial powers by introducing modern preventive and sanitary medicine created special conditions for mortality declines, without addressing the conditions behind high levels of child-bearing.

By accepting the officially sanctioned means to implement policy - influencing individuals rather than changing structures and conditions - as the limits to research, "third world" demography lost touch with the structural and power-related dimensions - centre/periphery and dependency relations, cultural imperialism etc - that preoccupied their colleagues in social science and could have opened the door for a vital reconsideration of theories on the demographic transition.³

Today, when over twenty of the so-called less developed countries or LDC have a fertility close to replacement level, and many of the others are understood to be well on their way in that direction, the growing convergence in the world in country demographic profiles (Wilson 2001) appears to move demography in two directions. One is a return to the technical, as it was phrased by George McNicoll (1992, 3-4):

"Demographers themselves seem to have reached a rough consensus that trends in vital events are progressing as they should, confirming their expectations and justifying the advice they have proffered to officialdom. In a familiar disciplinary trajectory, their attention is now taken up with technical issues - complex and, for those with that specialized taste, rewarding - leaving the public face of the field one of dull routine. "

The other is a growing interest in the demographic transition, which brings more dialogue with other social sciences, and a gradual convergence in the discourses of demographers specialised on the North and the South respectively.

Anthologies and monographs on the fertility part of the transition have grown in number through at least the 1990s. Interdisciplinary collaboration is increasingly common, and the questions asked are likely to produce much more interesting interpretations. Obviously, some inertia is present not only in population change itself, but equally in the articulations of the science;⁴ and insufficient attention is still paid to important aspects of the fertility trends, which may cause unexpected surprises in the near future. I will return to some of these further down.

3. Taking stock of current trends

3.1 Recent theoretical contributions on the demographic transition

The theoretical framework developed to encompass the European experience, the theory of demographic transition, was formulated in the 1940s and 1950s. Subsequent research on the patterns and correlations of the transition exposed a range of local variations, between countries and even more between regions or local areas. In some localities, fertility decline

³ In 1984, Nathan Keyfitz compared demography with the other, more expansion-oriented social sciences. He found that (quoted in McNicoll (1992:24): *"Far from being imperialistic, [demography] has withdrawn from its borders and left a no man's land which other disciplines have infiltrated."* In a foreword to the same book, Maximo Livi-Bacci complained: *"[O]ur discipline, after several decades of very rapid growth, of increasing specialization and technical sophistication, [runs] the risk of isolating itself, of becoming more a technique than a science..."* (Idem:26).

⁴ A recent publication by the US National Research Council (NRS 2000, ch.3) upholds the view that modern contraception has been "the dominant proximal force" behind postwar fertility declines, a view that is modified in later passages of the text. A similar pattern of reasoning is found in an influential study of fertility decline in Bangladesh (Cleland et al 1994), where initial statements about the significant role of family planning are replaced with admissions that they mainly serve to speed up a change initiated by other forces.

even preceded mortality decline. Susan Greenhalgh, in a review of fertility theory, adds to the critique of the classical transition theory. She refers to Kertzer and Hogan's studies in northern Italy, which

"corroborate the European Project's finding that fertility decline does not follow changes in such indexes of modernization as literacy, women's work, or female autonomy. But they go beyond the /European Project/ to demonstrate what it does follow: alterations in the value of children in the class-specific family economy. Political developments, such as the adoption of laws making school attendance compulsory and restricting child labour in factories, were crucial instigators of fertility change, underscoring the importance of political and legal forces that lie outside the purview of conventional theory." (Greenhalgh 1990:85f).

Later in the same article, she refers to research in the Sicily which confirms the above and "suggests that fertility transitions may best be construed as products of changes in class-specific opportunity structures in response to transformations of global and regional economies. ...the adoption of contraception may be an eminently political process, both reflecting and exacerbating power differentials between the sexes and classes" (Greenhalgh 1990, 98).

The legal and political changes Greenhalgh refers to are in themselves reflections of external processes, which influence the political processes in a given country. Can such dimensions be incorporated in theories on the demographic transition?

Painstaking historical research by Monica Das Gupta (1998) has demonstrated that in India, local communities in historical times have responded to changing economic conditions with temporary fertility adjustments similar to those in historical Europe. Dyson (1996) offers evidence of fertility declines in South Asia which started well before any substantial economic modernisation or introduction of modern contraception (for other examples, see the evidence of early fertility declines in Argentina and Uruguay in Guzmán et al. 1996).

Wilson's (2001) recent review of what he calls the growing demographic convergence in the word reconfirms the need to go beyond either economic development or special policy inputs in the search for understandings. Well aware of the state of pervasive poverty, high levels of illiteracy and gender inequities in many regions, he states: "...it is clear that social and demographic change has progressed far more rapidly than economic development". However, in terms of what kinds of social change are relevant for the process, we may only have reached the understanding that "...there are many demographic transitions, each driven by a combination of forces that are ...institutionally, culturally and temporally specific" (Greenhalgh 1990, 88).

In terms of their individual forms, the inter-relation between fertility and mortality dynamics, and the time-shape, there are bound to be many demographic transitions. This in itself does not preclude the workings of common factors, if not on the whole process so perhaps on the start. Dyson (1998) underlines the mortality transition as the basic and necessary condition for any fertility decline. And mortality declines are in themselves expressions of social change whose causes may also be related to reproduction.

This appears to be the position of Das Gupta (1999), in a contribution to the demographic transition debate which is ground-breaking in that it subsumes the European and non-

European transitions under a common framework. "It may well be that both socio-economic development and fertility transition are driven by the same gamut of institutional changes", she proposes (p.2), and focuses her search for these changes at the general level of diffusion of ideas. The point of departure is the variation in timing and speed of fertility changes in Indian states such as Punjab, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. The development experiences of these states are radically different. For instance, while Kerala's record of social development can be linked to the beginnings of fertility decline already in the 1940s, the same early timing has been demonstrated for Punjab, "almost a quarter of a century before the spread of education and the extension of the health and family planning programme" (p.6).

Das Gupta's conclusion is, that "whether states have placed greater emphasis on economic development or on social development is of far less consequence than whether they have placed emphasis on development at all" (p.9). The search for factors behind such differences brings her to the main shifts in socio-political institutions and order. The 19th and 20th century transformations marked a shift from hierarchical relations where power rested in local and national elites which "provided /the underlings/ some measure of insurance while severely circumscribing individual mobility". Embedded in this relation was a lack of sense of alternatives and choice. The change to a modern state was also a completely different relation to the citizen, "creating both the possibility and the incentive for /the latter/ to improve one's own situation" (p.15).

Das Gupta outlines two further steps in government/citizen relations: the establishment of modern governance, and the openings for "participatory processes of local governance".⁵ That more participatory local governance, by sharpening people's perception of the connection between their own actions and their wellbeing, is conducive to more rapid fertility decline fits with a variety of evidence from Asia.

Finally, Das Gupta outlines relations between technological change and fertility change. Modern contraceptive methods is one case, modern mass media another. The way canal irrigation in Colonial northern India brought people out a total dependence on "the vagaries of nature", and nurtured a perception that they could work to shape their lives also in other ways, is another relation which fits into Das Gupta's overall perspective on the importance of "development" as such.

'Development' should be expected to correlate with mortality declines. Without making any direct reference to the debate about the role of mortality decline, Das Gupta underlines that institutional change may drive different types of socio-economic development. In this interpretation 'development' and fertility decline are associated with each other while not necessarily sequential in nature. "Thus, for example, we should not be surprised to find fertility declining when levels of mortality are still relatively high or when standards of living are still quite low, as has empirically been the case in large parts of the world" (p. 21).

3.2 Most likely: unfinished demographic transition among growing poor strata

Effective instruments are nowadays available for monitoring change in vital rates parameters in a sufficient number of countries for the United Nations to be able to revise its global "world

⁵ As Das Gupta rightly points out, the latter is not necessarily part of national democracy.

population prospects" (WPP) every second year. Particular interest has been given to the trends in average fertility, both in empirical surveys and in the UN work.⁶

The 2000 WPP demonstrates the current state of "mobility of countries" down the scale towards low fertility: 21 LDC countries have a fertility at or below replacement level, while the majority of the remaining 122 LDC countries have levels below 5 children per woman.

Wilson (2001) interprets the trend as one of growing demographic convergence in the world. He summarises: "A large majority of the world's population is (or soon will be) demographically 'modern' by any definition." The WPP prefers to emphasise the opposite, namely growing signs of polarisation in the world: "Particularly rapid growth is expected among the group of countries classified as least developed. Their population is expected to nearly triple between 2000 and 2050..."; among those, 16 countries "exhibit sustained high fertility... for which there is either no recent evidence about fertility trends or the available evidence does not indicate the onset of a fertility reduction." (Idem, p.v; 7). In respect of the latter group of countries, the 1998 WPP was too optimistic about incipient fertility declines, and population estimates have been adjusted upwards in the 2000 WPP.

The WPP records another trend, so far poorly recognised in scientific reviews of fertility trends. For two South Asian countries regarded as well into the fertility transition, India and Bangladesh, there are clear signs of a stabilisation in fertility levels during the 1990s. In Bangladesh for instance, TFR remains at 3.3-3.4 right through the decade (BDHS 2000).⁷ There are no simple explanations available for this new trend. For instance, both educational enrolment and prevalence of contraceptive use have gone up during the decade. An as yet untested hypothesis is that family size has reached levels which are commensurate with average wishes.

Current-day instances of powerful constraints to a fertility fall to replacement level are not hard to find. Some Arab states, Pakistan and other countries where conservative traits of Islam dominate, are a good case. There are countries in Sub-Saharan Africa whose exclusion from development in politically stable conditions sharply reduce the probability that urban-based social movements towards smaller families will spread broadly over the country. Not least in the latter context, anything remotely similar to universal access to contraceptives would seem out of the question. A highly likely scenario is that even where fertility declines are initiated, the demographic transition will remain unfinished among growing poor strata.

These types of fertility trends appear so far to be missing not only in the theorising over but equally in current empirical work on fertility decline. Perhaps the implicit and never tested assumption inherited from the first formulations of the demographic transition, that fertility will fall to replacement level, still has an impact on our thinking? For the group of 'more developed countries', this assumption has proved untenable - with few exceptions fertility has

⁶ The World Fertility Survey system was later replaced by so-called Demographic and Health Surveys, which are run intermittently in different countries of the South. The data from the DHS rounds are available for secondary analysis, while the vital rates estimates dominate the data base for estimations of population trends. The UN World Population Prospects contains projections based on three different fertility projections but only one mortality projection.

⁷ WPP 2000 mentions Nigeria as a third country where this pattern is estimated. The different adjustments made in the 2000 version due to such observations result in higher 2050 projections than two years earlier. A period of downward adjustments from one WPP version to the next might now be over.

continued to fall well below 2, and a bottom level of 1-1.5 appears more likely. For less developed countries, family systems and living conditions may well generate other bottom levels, different for different countries and regions.⁸

3.3 Widening differences, further impoverishment

"Face reality. Think the unthinkable. Be intellectually honest and politically realistic about what is happening to the overwhelming majority of people in Third World countries. With a very few exceptions, development has not come. Nor is it going to. The necessary investment will not be available. Modern technology cannot provide the jobs. And the environment cannot take the strain. Most countries are not in the process of becoming Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs), but Non-viable National Economies (NNEs). What then is to be done? The wealth of nations agenda must be replaced by a survival of nations agenda. To prevent increasing disorders, many countries will have to abandon dreams of development and adopt instead a policy of national survival based on the search for water, food and energy security and the stabilization of their populations."⁹

Despite much evidence to the contrary, an overwhelming tendency in population/development analysis, including writings about the demographic transition, is to assume that poorer regions and countries will catch up, or get out of their poverty traps, within a foreseeable future.¹⁰ UN projections assume further mortality declines, temporarily affected only by AIDS. Further improvements in living standards and national incomes must be (by default) an implicit assumption behind projections that give modern contraception a key role in people's switch to smaller families. So well entrenched is this thinking, that Tim Dyson (1998), reviewing an anthology on the fertility transition, feels compelled to remind his colleagues that without the mortality transition there would be no fertility transition to talk about.

The Human Development Report, published annually by UNDP, has regularly reported on another trend: that of increasing polarisation between poor and rich, of economic stagnation in poor countries, of lack of improvements in living standards for poor communities. Concrete demonstrations of this trend are given in Sutcliffe (2001), a new publication on global inequalities. Several of the poorest countries of the world are now hit by AIDS, an epidemic that has begun to cut into the most valuable asset of any nation, its young adults. To search for policies of survival might not be entirely wrong as an advice.

Population increase is part of the poverty issue. Reviewing the links between poverty and environment, Ekbohm and Bojö (1999, 13) argue that whether population increase induces negative or positive environmental change "is ultimately and fundamentally driven by the overall policy framework." Rather than to embark on fertility-reducing programmes, they recommend that "underlying policy and market failures should be scrutinised and corrected first and foremost." It is an old wisdom, and still so difficult to turn into action. The global economic development seems to work against this advice.

⁸ Paul Demeny is reported to have written: "The idea of a trend towards a stationary population might be justifiable from a normative point of view, but it lacks theoretical, empirical and historical support." (Quoted in Tabah 1990)

⁹ Taken from the launching text of Oswaldo de Rivero, *The Myth of Development - The Non-viable Economies of the 21st Century*, Zed Books 2001

¹⁰ His review of global trends leads Wilson (2001) to conclude: "...it is clear that social and demographic change has progressed far more rapidly than economic development." Presumably aware of the state of pervasive poverty, high levels of illiteracy and gender inequities in many regions, he states: "It will be a long time, though, before a majority will be rich".

In a powerful analysis of both macro- and micro-trends in the world today, Manuel Castells uses unconventional language to communicate his findings. The way globalisation works, by excluding segments of economies and societies, people and territories shift into "a position of structural irrelevance. This widespread, multiform process of social exclusion leads to the constitution of what I call, taking the liberty of a cosmic metaphor, the *black holes of international capitalism*. These are regions of society from which, statistically speaking, there is no escape from the pain and destruction inflicted on the human condition for those who, in one way or another, enter these social landscapes" (Castells 2000, 165, italics author's). Together, these black holes of social exclusion make up a Fourth World, which "comprises large areas of the globe, such as much of Sub-Saharan Africa, and impoverished rural areas of Latin America and Asia. But it is also present in literally every country, and every city, in this new geography of social exclusion." (p.168)

Castells' description needs to be modified in the direction of accepting degrees of social exclusion, or inclusion, around the world. Still, his metaphor is valuable as a guiding perspective for analysis of current trends and relations. It certainly supports the views already referred to, that in some areas and countries policies of survival is a more apt challenge than policies of development.

4. A likely prospect: population increase will continue

Demographic dynamics will play out differently in the three worlds of the 21st century. More developed countries are moving into a state of sustained population decline. Less developed countries have to handle long periods of continued population increase, generally linked to the ageing of their populations. The Fourth World concept epitomises those areas where fertility is unlikely to drop to replacement levels so that population increase remains a part of the future.

The West is firmly into a process of reinforcing its walls against mass immigration. This process is continually reinforced by the growing economic and social gaps between them and the majority of the less developed countries. Even if such barriers would not be there, the level of migration required to balance, or even substantially reduce, rates of population increase in poor regions is simply too high to be either theoretically or practically an alternative.

5. Will 21st century demographers face up to this dimension of our world?

In 1990, the former head of the UN Population Division Léon Tabah (1990) presented to a DAC meeting his views on the prospects of population development in the world. He pointed at many unrealistic assumptions behind international population projections, and demanded a greater realism in order for the world community to phase up to the challenges of continued population increase in poor areas. His plea appears to have gone unheeded.

Year one of the 21st century¹¹ is a good occasion to review and revise all the main agendas of population studies of the last fifty years. One agenda that indeed should be carried over into

¹¹ As 2000 must be the last year of the last century, we are now in the first year of the next.

the new century is reflection and analysis over the demographic transition. Dyson (1998) has labelled it "a global phenomenon, and arguably the most important turn of events of our time." His statement has weight in terms of the development of humankind as much as for the science of population studies.

Das Gupta's exploration of the role of institutions and broad socio-political change offers a potentially very fruitful framework for new country-studies, blending political economy with demography. It is tempting to consider whether by introducing a dimension of social differentiation, including exclusion, a reference could be found to Castells' 'black holes' analysis. Although Castells himself does not refer to social classes, Greenhalgh's focus on "class-specific opportunity structures" appears quite fit to his way of reasoning, and indeed to much of the differential pattern of reproduction seen in countries and regions today.

The prospect of non-development in many parts of the poor regions, and the corresponding probability of fertility remaining above replacement level, hold out a serious challenge to both science and politics. Devoted science - perhaps a new version of the "concerned demography" of the late 20th century, is likely to become a strong requirement of the new century.

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