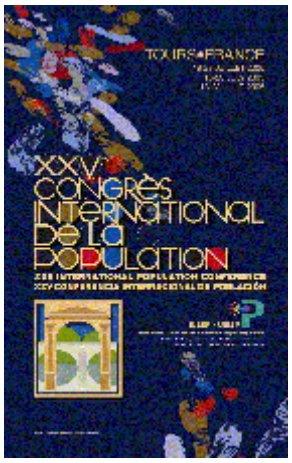

Opening session

Speech by Jacques Vallin, president of the IUSSP

Thank you Madam President,

M. the Minister,

M. the European Commissioner,

M. the Major of Tours,

M. the Representative of the UNFPA,

M. the President of the François Rabelais University,

M. the President of the Institut de recherche pour le développement,

Mrs the Director of the Population Division of the United Nations,

M. the Director of the Institut national d'études démographiques,

Mrs the Secretary General of the IUSSP,

dear colleagues, dear friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

For the President of the IUSSP, opening the International Population Conference is always a very emotional moment, for three main reasons.

The first is that the conference convenes only every four years. Each time is a momentous event in the life of the Union and of all its members. The second reason is that for the Union's president it is always the first time, since he is elected for a four-year term and thus presides the event only once.

The third, and probably the strongest reason, is that he is addressing all his colleagues and he feels that he cannot, must not disappoint them. A naive illusion, very likely!

Of course, the gratitude expressed by Catherine Rollet is also mine. First, I would like to say to Mr. Germain, Mayor of Tours and to the Presidents of the Department of Indre-et-Loire and of the "Centre" region who he represents here, how happy I am that our conference is being held in our good city of Tours, on the banks of the majestic Loire river, where I have many childhood memories, in this magnificent region of France with its chateaux, beautiful parks, and good wine which will doubtless charm all the participants. This would have not been possible without their generous offer and their sustained support. I would also like to thank the French government for being so generous to the IUSSP, and not once but twice, first by offering us hospitality in Paris during the last four years, and then by making it possible to convene the 2005 conference in France. We are extremely grateful for the precious moral, material and financial aid provided by the Ministries of Research, of Foreign Affairs, and of course, by INED, whose director, François Héran, has loyally and abidingly supported the Union and the Tours conference. I would also like to thank Mr. Spidla and Mr. Waki, who represent respectively the European Union and the United Nations Population Fund and who have significantly contributed to the success of this event. And of course, I am also thinking of all the other institutions and persons of good will, especially the National Organization Committee which, under the supervision of its president, Catherine Rollet (here at the table), and its coordinator, Véronique Hertrich (somewhere among you), tirelessly and selflessly laboured during many months to prepare for this wonderful moment we are going to share together.

Welcome to all, who have come from all over the world in greater numbers than ever before to attend a Union conference. Welcome to the Tours Conference!

The Tours Conference ! These three words mean a lot to the French, and probably not only to the French, since they bring us back to a painful moment in history, when in 1920 the French socialist movement broke into two separate currents. This event had a considerable influence on later political developments in our country. But rest assured, we are not planning such a division at the IUSSP. However, though we have been spared such rifts, the international community of demographers, and particularly the IUSSP, have gone through difficult times. As we all know, the world's demographic situation has changed. Everywhere, the mortality decline, which had led to unprecedented population growth, has been followed by a fertility decline. The great fear of a population explosion has abated, along with the euphoria of these plentiful years when demographic research and the IUSSP were coddled by political authorities and received generous funding. The Union has been left with no choice but to adapt to these new conditions, and learn to function like other learned societies, that is by depending at least as much on its own resources as on public funds. Does this mean that present and future demographic issues are politically less important than the largely irrational fear of a demographic explosion? I don't think so. On one hand, the end of the demographic transition is not "just rolling along" like ole' man river, as the transition theory seemed to have it. Rather, like our Loire river it is unpredictable, full of surprises. And as a result, present demographic trends are now revealing crucial issues which our societies are far from having resolved.

1. The end of the transition is not like ole' man river, just "rolling along" as the theory would have us believe

The two basic assumptions underlying the idea of a transition from an earlier demographic equilibrium to a new equilibrium (the convergence of life expectancies towards a maximum limit, on one hand, and on the other hand the stabilisation of fertility around 2 children per women) have both been contradicted by the facts.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. The good news we learned back in the 1970s is that that, contrary to an almost universally accepted assumption, life expectancy has been increasing and is still increasing beyond the limits which each period considered to be the last: 75 in the 1980s, 85 in the 1990s, 100 today, according to pessimistic estimates… and where will it stop? Who knows?

However, there are some bad news as well. In particular, the significant reduction in cardiovascular diseases, which happened in Western countries, remained inaccessible to Eastern European countries. Instead, they plunged into a long-lasting health crisis from which some have not yet emerged today. But the worst to come was AIDS. Not only it destroyed all hope of totally eradicating infectious mortality, but it even caused life expectancy to decline by 10, 15 or even 20 years in some African countries. Today, we must admit two unexpected facts: on one hand, when the conditions are good, we are able to push the limits of life expectancy beyond what was considered possible; on the other hand, the joyous hope of a general convergence towards the highest life expectancy has shown itself to be an illusion since, given the economic, social, political, cultural contexts of our various societies, innovations in matters of health lead to inequalities, favouring those who are ready to benefit from them; and when the stay-behinds finally catch up with the pioneers, the gap is once again widened by new advances in other fields. And these inequalities between countries can be observed within countries, between different social classes.

As concerns fertility, here again the trends do not follow expected patterns. Overall, the rate dropped much faster than foreseen. Although this information is bound to reassure those who feared a demographic explosion, such a rapid decline does not only have advantages and more importantly, the figures are now reaching lows that were unheard of less than 25 years ago: the German rate of 1.4 children per woman in the 1980s was already cause for concern; a few years later, Italy and Spain were down to 1.2, many Mediterranean or eastern regions of Europe have dropped below 1, and even in Far-East Asia, with a rate of 0.8 in Hong Kong for example… will this downward trend ever stop? If the theory of the demographic transition enabled us to better understand, if not better manage, the phase of exceptional growth of the world population, conversely the fact that basic parameters have failed to stabilise casts dark clouds over the brilliant future the theory seemed to announce: it seems that what we are witnessing today is not the end of the demographic transition but the death of its underlying theory.

Out with the theory, out with our clear vision of the future. Was it necessary to invent the theory of the second demographic transition, as Dirk van Kaa and Ron Lesthaege tried to do? I suppose so. However, I wonder if it wouldn't be simpler and truer to return to what Adolphe Landry called the

“demographic revolution”, instead of transition, before it was revised by Frank Notestein and a few others. Adolphe Landry never said that fertility would stabilise at 2 children per woman, on the contrary he was concerned that modern behaviours were likely to cause a steeper decline. For this reason he was intent on warning public authorities about this trend. In fact, it all seems to begin and end with Landry, with Notestein’s theory coming in as a parenthesis — a parenthesis which, though reassuring on the short term, brought nothing more than illusions on the long term; a very useful parenthesis, enabling us to understand demographic trends in the Third World, but which nonetheless must now be closed. Of course this does not mean that a solution has been found, because neither the demographic revolution theory nor that of the second transition can tell us where and when the fertility decline will end.

On the other hand, we can try and measure its consequences.

Even though, intrinsically, a fertility rate of consistently less than 2 children per woman would be insufficient to ensure generation replacement, this does not necessarily mean that the population will decrease in the near future. On one hand, as long as life expectancy continues to grow, the death rate can be lower than the birth rate while ensuring a certain balance, and even natural increase. But the price to pay is of course an acceleration of the aging of the population. On the other hand, positive net migration can offset a negative natural increase. Immigration can even slow down demographic aging, at least at first. But it would be naïve to count on compensatory phenomena to counter the threat of population decline in any lasting way, since it is very unlikely that our life span can extend indefinitely, and even less likely that immigrants will continue to pour in forever… Of course, some may take comfort in thinking that a population reduction in a globally overpopulated planet would not be such a bad thing. Yes, but let us not forget that just like rapid growth, rapid decline can pose grave problems of economic, social, political adaptation. And anyway, unless you consider of course that the Universe can survive without the human species, such a decline must end somewhere. Does that mean that we must try to avoid a decrease? This is an eminently political question. However, the question, “can we avoid it” is a fully scientific question, which demographers will have to pore over increasingly, along with their colleagues from other disciplines.

2. From the end of the paradigm to the diversification of issues

Unexpected trends, the demise of the main explanatory paradigm of our discipline: in the face of deep societal transformations, demographers must revise their approach. Not only do traditional issues have to be analysed in a changing context, but new questions are also emerging. I cannot list them all, of course. But let us begin with three or four old issues, which in my view must now be considered from an entirely different perspective.

First of all, the problems linked to rapid growth have not been resolved everywhere, far from it. If the growth rate of the world population has been slowing down constantly since the 1970s and has now reached the very moderate level of 1.2% per year, a rate which in the 60s, Alfred Sauvy would have considered only barely sufficient to ensure economic dynamism, it is still over 2% in Sub-Saharan Africa and has even reached 2.5% in intertropical Africa, a rate never attained by the world population even at the peak of the explosion. It is all the more crucial not to disregard the problems resulting from this situation, that the countries concerned are also those whose economies are most fragile and more than ever exposed to the risks brought by globalization and international economic liberalism. If the

countries of the North, anxious about growing competition with emerging countries, continue to ignore the need for development aid, which, alas, clearly seems to be the way things are going, this may lead to disaster for the poorest countries.

Second lasting question, should we not also look at the problem of migrations from this angle? Indeed, what kind of world are we living in, where traditional economic theories are increasingly referred to when dealing with the exchange of goods and services, but are completely ignored when it comes to the circulation of persons? Can we accept the principle of total freedom to buy and sell anything anywhere, without applying this freedom to the labour market? Many demographic, economic, social issues directly depend on the eminently political response given to this question. Indeed, the reticence shown by Europe to address these questions is puzzling. It seems that by turning the question of strong borders into a major political and electoral issue, we are creating an unnecessary climate of fear. We can bear witness to the fact that neither the fall of the Berlin wall, nor the extension of the EU to Eastern European countries have unleashed the promised tidal of wave of immigrants. Should we expect a Turkish tidal wave if Turkey ever becomes a member of the European Union? This is highly unlikely. To migrate is a very difficult decision, and very few make it if there are chances of development in their own country. What would be so terrible about opening our borders to the countries of the Maghreb? On the contrary, the rich countries that will stay rich aren't those which, like the United States for example, have a relatively sustained immigration policy. And, given the high rate of the fertility decline in the countries of the South, would it be irrelevant to wonder whether immigrant resources are not likely to be soon be depleted.

And what about the role of population dynamics in the global ecological equilibrium of our world? Southern countries were often accused to be a huge threat because of the uncontrolled demography. This is false twice. On one hand, these countries will have controlled their population growth more rapidly than the Northern countries did, finally. But, even more, the small billion of humans who live in rich countries entails much more global ecology than the five billions of poor countries all together. However, what is true, is that an economic development of the South, which would follow the Northern American model would rapidly lead to a catastrophe. In particular, an increasing of the level of oceans would very likely result in the immersion of very populated countries like Bangladesh. Not only needs for development are crucial, but the means to meet them must take care of environmental constraints.

And, last but no less pressing question, how far can the aging of the population extend and what will be its consequences? The fact that a population is aging in the demographic sense of the term is rather good news, if aging is the result of a mortality decline. Then it simply means that people are living longer and mankind has fulfilled one of its oldest dreams. Under the stationary model of the end of the transition, our societies would have to make in-depth readjustments required by the age structure in which overall the proportion of persons over 65 would be equal to that of those under 20. In that case, such readjustments remain possible. But if the fertility rate drops in a lasting way to under 2 children per woman, then the situation will become much more problematic, because when the depleted generations will have reached working age while their more numerous elders are retiring, the contingency funds, regardless which kind, will be unable to fulfil their objectives. Simple readjustment will not be enough and we will have to revolutionize our lifestyles.

But beyond the fact that we must view these old demo-economic issues from a new angle, we demographers are also faced with entirely new issues.

Only recently, demography was a relatively simple matter: nuptiality, fertility, mortality could change over time and space, depending on culture, economics, politics, but nevertheless they rested on basic, practically immutable facts. Men and women have clearly separate social roles, especially in the field of reproduction. Marriage is the basis of the family, birth comes after a 9-month pregnancy period, and in 105 cases out of 100 it's a boy, old age leads to death, though the latter may in some cases be caused by disease or accidents. None of this is quite true any more.

Firstly, while sex meant imposed social roles, it becomes more and more restricted to its biological function, vanishing in front of a new reality, born from women's call for equal rights but which goes much beyond by putting under the limelight the growing importance of gender relations. And this is by no doubt the first factor for most of the other upheavals.

Clearly the couple and the family are no longer what they used to be. Marriage is no longer the only mode of couple formation, if it ever was, and new couples are now extremely diverse. In addition to civil and religious marriages, which still exist, all sorts of forms of cohabitation have developed, and there are even couples which do not live together, couples which as Catherine Villeneuve-Gokalp aptly put it "living apart together". Not to mention homosexual couples which, going the opposite way of heterosexual couples, are increasingly aspiring to social recognition and demanding (and obtaining in some countries) an equal right to legal marriage…

Not only must demographers acknowledge the diversity of this changing reality in order to describe it as accurately as possible, but they must try to understand its influence on population dynamics: is it or is it not the cause of low fertility? And there is divorce, both legal and de facto, whose incidence is also changing, and all sorts of new types of step families. Do the latter encourage or restrict fertility? There is no obvious answer to this question. In addition, homosexuals are also demanding the right to become parents. The role of the demographer is certainly not to make moral or even political judgments concerning these trends, but he must try to understand their underlying determinations and assess their consequences.

Lifestyle changes are not the only disturbing factor for demographers. Technological changes also have a significant impact. The development of simple and cheap prenatal diagnosis systems have led, in some contexts, to a sudden modification of the only demographic parameter which seemed, until now, absolutely immutable: the sex ratio at birth. An entire debate will be devoted to this question during one of our plenary sessions. However, pregnancy is today at the centre of even deeper changes: more and more children are conceived in test-tubes and the tubes are replacing the mother's womb for longer and longer periods of time. And, thanks to improved incubators, the womb can be left earlier and earlier without endangering the child's chances of surviving. From test-tubes to incubators, will babies some day be born without ever having been carried by a mother?

And what is happening at the end of life is no less strange, when you think of it: advances in biology and medicine (and also in living conditions and lifestyles) are pushing death further and further away, but due to these same advances, the thought of the body's slow deterioration before death has become intolerable, and the right to die with dignity has become a major aspiration. Are we not expecting from our doctors that they find a way of allowing us to live until the age of 100 or 120 in perfect health, and expecting from our elected representatives that they allow us to choose our time of death?

In short, will demographers, who are already living Amin Maalouf's world of the First Century After Beatrice, soon find themselves stuck between Aldous Huxley's Brave New World and Richard Fleischer's Soylent Green?

Of course we have not yet reached such extremes, but it is true that we must increasingly deal with new and diverse situations which are always, for better or for worse, at the intersection between science and politics.