

World Population Policies: Their Origin, Evolution, and Impact

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Introduction

The book should not, and will not, pass unnoticed, and not just among specialists in the field of population studies proper, but well beyond, not the least among those engaged in geopolitics and international relations. For whatever forces shape the future of our world, demographics will prevail. A top World Bank population expert, John May combines field experience with deep intellectual thinking, so the book ought to appeal to both scholars and practitioners. The book is much more than its title says. It is all demography minus techniques.

In proceeding with this review essay, I will have to be highly selective among the wide range of topics competing for our attention.

The scope and ubiquitous nature of population problems

Right at the book's start, the reader is presented with the scope and the ubiquitous nature of what are perceived to be *population problems*. Not so long ago, in the post-World War II years and way into the seventies, the world was preoccupied by population *growth*. Even Western Europe and North America, in the postwar years of the “baby boom,” didn't quite escape the population growth scare in their own yard. There was a flurry of advocacy for a stationary population, or rather, what was communally known as *zero growth*, in the name of natural resource conservation.

Though *population explosion* is no longer the burning issue it was, we are not quite over with it. Sub-Saharan Africa is still experiencing a staggering population growth of 2 to 3 per cent *per annum*, with potential fallouts, not only for Africa itself, but also for Europe and North America. Within Africa, many of the popula-

tions growing rapidly will find it difficult to move out of the Malthusian poverty trap; others will lag in their pace of economic development, and some may experience an intensification of interethnic tensions. Population pressure will of course mean a growing likelihood of mass emigration to other parts of the world, especially Europe and North America.

Although concerns with rapid population growth have taken a back seat (again, except in sub-Saharan Africa), the world is being visited by another set of population problems, this time in the economically most advanced societies. As they progress into a regime of *demographic maturity*, these societies face the parallel problem of demographic deceleration, i.e., *population implosion*, with far-reaching social, national, and geopolitical implications. For some, it has already become a matter of national survival. Triggered by quasi-endemic sub-fertility, this phenomenon is gaining ground worldwide. The book reports that already 46 per cent of the world population has fallen into a sub-fertility regime.

Policy responses to these shifting population problems vary across the world. The two key chapters of the book are devoted to policy responses in developing countries and in developed countries, respectively.

Population policies: developing countries

John May presents a thorough overview of population policies in developing countries. His discussion of issues relating population to health and reproduction is especially enlightening. It is argued that solving problems in these two interrelated areas requires multiple solutions, sometimes competing approaches to intervention, and most of all, broad international cooperation and active involvement of the affected states. There have been major improvements in population health in poor developing countries. However, with the eradication of mass epidemics came improvements in living standards—modest as they may be—and rapid population growth. For such countries, coping with high fertility has become an urgent matter, with family planning a dominant component of their population policies.

The author speaks of the *contraceptive revolution*, with Asia, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean, as leaders in this development. In 1960, only 10 per cent of the world's women of reproductive age used a modern or traditional method of contraception. That number rose to 63 per cent in 2008 (of which 57 per cent had adopted a modern method). Along with contraceptive practices, sterilization and induced abortion were widely resorted to, particularly in such countries as Vietnam and India. China had its home-grown brand of policy intervention: the *one-child rule*. This policy was imposed by government fiat and policed quite effectively, regardless of human rights violations. The net result was a substantial reduction of fertility and hence in the rate of population growth in all those countries that embraced some form of family planning policy. However, while this family planning revolution swept the developing world, most of sub-Saharan Africa eluded it, and the use of modern contraceptives remains low today among sub-Saharan populations, even in the urban centers.

Population policies: developed countries

In developed countries, persistent *sub-replacement fertility*, *aging*, and *immigration* are recognized, according to the book, as the three major population policy issues. Not least are the problems pertaining to *population implosion*, actual or impending, and urban *overcrowding*. What should be the proper policy responses to these issues? Sub-replacement fertility and immigration, in particular, are “areas in which effective policies are hard to come by,” writes the author (p. 240). May questions whether Western democracies have at all a population policy regarding these matters of concern. What they have instead, according to him, are social policies that have some implicit links to demographic policies; “...population policy interventions in industrialized countries have been more indirect and implicit than direct and explicit” (p. 171).

The section of the book entitled “Reaching a policy consensus” elaborates on the absence of population policy and obstacles to having one in these countries. May casts light on the deep-seated discord among Western policy makers and the public, and the general inability to reach even a minimum consensus. He states that “...the debate... is marred by controversy and passion” and that “...discussions on policy issues are polarized” (p. 200). Policy actors seem to be torn between a *laissez-faire* attitude, “which is akin to carelessness” (p. 200), on the one hand, and a desire to address population issues decisively and proactively, on the other. Further, he says, “Demographic problems are not analyzed in a pragmatic way, free of political or ideological agendas, being too often framed by traditional opposition between Left and Right” (p. 200). Moreover, some Western commentators go so far as to deny that any problem exists. “[T]he politically correct view prevailed that increasing sub-replacement fertility was not an issue and definitely not a cause worth promoting publically” (p. 202). May opines that even some demographers have joined in this attitude, “dubbing any interest in future population trends as a demographic obsession” (p. 200). May concludes that there are many lobby groups in industrialized countries competing for attention, each promoting their own agenda. Unfortunately, with regard to the population concerns mentioned, “... leaders and the public alike have turned a blind eye to pressing issues...” (p. 172).

These quotations speak loudly of the ideological *désarroi* in matters of demographic debate in the Western world, as well as of governments’ impotence to come up with effective *national* population policies. Is this state of affairs confined to the Western democracies? Indeed this seems to be the case. Far Eastern Asian democracies, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, are faced with the same problems, even more so. Their fertility is lower, they are more advanced in population aging, and their populations are shrinking. Yet they resist immigration. They opt for automation as a response to dwindling manpower. Unlike the Western democracies, they are manifestly concerned with what massive and indiscriminate immigration may do to national identity and social cohesion. I wish the book had delved more on the Japan and South Korea experience. By contrast, in Western democracies, immigration became an ideology, almost a religion, so much so that any rational discussion thereof is hardly possible. Questioning diversity amounts to a *lèse-majesté*.

Ideologies: *laissez-faire*, interventionists, family planning, and developmentalists

Ideologies are not far beneath the population policy debates. One case in point is the one involving liberals—the proponents of *laissez-faire*—and interventionists. The former hold to the idea that the *invisible hand*, i.e., nature by its own hidden devices, will ultimately, after some painful readjustments, generate the best possible solutions; the latter believe that things cannot be left to nature alone and that society has a role in regulating social processes. While one can agree with the liberals that the State has no business in the bedrooms of the people, and that at the individual level childbearing is a private matter, at the aggregate level society has a role, and even a duty, to influence procreative behaviour by means of various public policies in the name of the public good.

Another case in point of ideologically driven debates is found between the proponents of family planning and the proponents of development. The futility of ideologically driven debates has been manifest all along, and especially at the Belgrade, Bucharest, and Mexico world population conferences. The nadir occurred at the Bucharest conference, with the standoff between the “capitalists” (Malthusians) and “communists” (Marxists). The former stood for family planning as the fastest and most efficient way to bring fertility down; the latter opposed it, arguing that the solution is in socio-economic development: “development is the best contraceptive.”

As a Canadian delegate to the Bucharest conference in 1974, I witnessed the oratory joust between the American and the Soviet delegates. Rockefeller, as spokesman for the Americans, was thoughtful, speaking softly, and no match for the fiery Soviet spokesman, who managed to collect applause from underdeveloped, unaligned countries, and from some Western delegates, as well. Population “problems,” according to the Soviet delegate, are inherently capitalist, and will disappear with the advent of socialism. Yet Marx’s “From each according to his ability to each according to his need” has remained what it was—a utopia. The stark reality in the most advanced of Marxist states, i.e., the Soviet Union, was very different from what it was proclaimed to be: chronic shortage of housing and consumer goods, natural and politically motivated, man-made famines, endemic alcoholism, and high rates of abortion due to lack of access to effective contraceptives. In fact, Soviet demography was much closer to the Malthusian than to the hoped-for Marxist version of demography. The one-child fertility typical of Soviet urban couples was by and large the result of “overburdened” Soviet women and their all-out mobilization into the workforce while also carrying their traditional heavy load of household chores. I make this observation to emphasize the chasm that prevailed, in those heydays of population debates, between the reality on the ground and the rhetoric in the conference rooms.

The result of the Bucharest Conference was a plan of action—namely, plenty of developmental rhetoric along with a watering down of the importance of family planning programs.

Author's position in these and other controversies

To these and similar ideological and philosophical biases, John May offers a sober analysis of population policies, how they work or fail to work. He takes issue with *reductionists* by emphasizing the enormous complexity of social processes. Changes occur not in isolation but in unison of a multiplicity of factors; there is no linearity between cause and effect. “In politics, a straight line is the shortest distance to disaster.” This is the motto of his chapter “Population Policies Framework.”

The best we can master are partial theories or conceptual frameworks that fit certain stages in human evolution, describe a given situation, capture the underlying forces, identify specific problems, and design the best possible solutions. Pragmatism rather than dogmatism is the right way. “The controversies between Malthusians and Marxists have been more ideological than evidenced-based and more theoretical than empirical” (p. 47). As to the controversy of “family planning versus economic development,” May takes a conciliatory stance: “[A] closer look at the impact of family planning programs demonstrates that they operate in synergy with other socioeconomic changes” (p. 235). Sure, there are plenty of cases to demonstrate that fertility reduction can take place as a result of social, medical, and economic improvements in the absence of centrally directed family planning. Western societies are a case in point. But just consider the situation in the developing countries (India or Egypt), undergoing a veritable population boom as result of reduction in mortality while culturally their masses were stagnant, not ready to engage spontaneously in any birth limitation. Eventually, the family planning revolution spread throughout the developing world, including in the least expected Islamic countries (Iran), and was fostered by the international family planning movement, with strong American financial support (I should add, by those very Americans who were booed at the Bucharest conference). According to May, “... a new population paradigm could emerge, one that would hopefully be less ideological, more pragmatic, and more centered on the needs of women” (p. 114).

The role of population in economic development, too, escapes clear determination. “Some economists have long been skeptical about any connection between population growth and economic outcomes,” says the author. Indeed, history sends contradictory signals on this score. The economic take-off in the so-called Asian Tiger economies (Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea) is ascribed by many scholars to the abundant and cheap labour force in these countries. By contrast, in the case of Africa, with its rapidly growing population, there is a huge unemployed or underemployed labour force. For instance, in the crown of Africa, wealthy in natural resources, the Democratic Republic of Congo economy remains stagnant. Even more paradoxical is the case of the former Soviet countries—their populations are not only numerous but also highly educated and professional. The Russian Federation alone harbours 40 per cent of the world’s natural resources. Yet much of the population is still poverty-stricken, and emigration is rampant. Since 1991, five million out of a total population of fifty-two million persons have left Ukraine. So clearly, it is not that *population* is “neutral,” but that the way it works or fails to work can be comprehended only in conjunction with the workings of other forces. French demographers who have dealt with the rela-

tionship between population, ecology, and economics, with particular attention to Africa, speak of an approach that amounts to a holistic one: « *L'enjeu est finalement celui de la prise en compte de l'homme total, qui n'est pas seulement homo demographicus (... fécondité, mortalité et mobilité), ni homo economicus (sa dimension productive et consommatrice), ni homo politicus (le citoyen)* » (Colomb and Gendreau 2004: 23; Gendreau and Veron 1992). In the case of the Asian economic “tigers,” effective political strategies were designed to convert idle manpower into a productive workforce, thus generating not only development but also prosperity. This development was facilitated by the *demographic dividend* that resulted from high fertility rates and rapid population growth in the past, followed by significant fertility declines and reduced rates of natural increase more recently. The large cohorts born during the high fertility period later became the large entry labour force. The timing was right for these large cohorts. They entered the world of work in a context of economic growth promoted by government policies. Unfortunately, neither Africa nor the former Soviet countries have managed to create the structural and political conditions to take advantage of their human resources.

One feature of particular significance for any discussion of population policies is the possible hidden (i.e., unintended) consequences of policy interventions. Farid Zakaria, in his thought provoking book *The Post-American World*, in comparing the highly successful birth control system in China with the debilitating one in India, remarks that the former country is faced with a serious youth gap and sex ratio imbalance, whereas for the latter the problem is a large youth bulge in the population age structure. “The lesson is that all social engineering has unintended consequences. If demography is destiny, India’s future is secure” (2008: 13). Should we give up any attempt of social engineering? Not at all. Nor should we give up any attempt to measure its impact. While we shall do our best to minimize risk-taking, risk is inherent to any action. You close one hole, and nature breaks out through another. History is replete with ironies and twists.

Future prospects

As one who for a fair part of his professional life has been in the business of peering into the future, I was particularly interested in the book’s final chapter, “Future Prospects for Population Policies.” This chapter is to be read against the background of population projections in an earlier chapter, “World Population Trends and Issues.” There are two questions to be considered: how is the world population to develop as we step farther into 21st century, and what is likely to be the policy feedback? On the first question, two major overlapping scenarios loom on the horizon. After decades of exponential world population growth, a slowdown is in the making. Still, we may reach a high of ten billion by 2050. Meanwhile, regional disparities in population growth have been widening. By 2050, Europe’s projected population is 691 million compared to 1,998 million for Africa and 5,231 million for Asia (United Nations 2009). On an intercontinental scale, the two extreme poles are Europe and Africa, the first with deeply entrenched sub-replacement fertility, the latter with a persistent high fertility; the first turning into an immigration zone, the latter into an emigration area. Comparison between Germany and Ethiopia speaks loudly about the looming disparities. In 2010 the

total populations of these two countries were 82 and 85 million, respectively; by 2050, they may be 72 and 174 million, respectively. This stands to have some major geopolitical implications, as we shall see later.

Regarding the policy agenda, the book forecasts some already present concerns, as well as some new ones. “Today, population advocates and donors ... are working to reposition family planning within the wide spectrum of other health interventions, i.e., reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, health sector systems strengthening, and the fight against major diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria” (p. 116). Some issues already on the policy agenda, like the environment and climate change, will get further attention in the future, according to May. Others, like empowerment of women, poverty, inequality, the elderly, and immigrants, stand to receive more attention. So does the problem of youth bulge in the poor countries. New issues are emerging, including biotechnology, sex selection, and genetic engineering.

Prompted by the “Cairo consensus,” the extension of the policy agenda from what I would call “hard core” over to “soft” policy matters renders the population agenda “fragmented and unfocused” (p. 146). By “soft” I mean many issues such as global warming, human rights, sexual orientation, gender, poverty, youth, security, etc.—important, no doubt, in their own right but peripheral to the core of demography, namely, reproduction and health. The achievement of the ambitious Millennium Development Goals, too, will require repositioning of the targets, reprioritization, a sharpening of intervention strategies, greater flexibility in programming population policies, but also a *bottom-up* rather than the (so far) *top-down* approach to address regional and group-specific problems.

To this reviewer, when seen through a global prism, two major demographic problems remain to be more fully addressed. One is sub-Saharan Africa, the other is Western Europe. Africa’s problem is its staggering population growth: “[Slow[ing] down the pace of demographic growth is a prerequisite to improving Africa’s human capital and its economic performance” (p. 265). “[Yet] ... demographic issues are conspicuously absent from the African development debate” (p. 264). As for the West, to this reviewer, the demographic outlook is bleak. Their immigration policy is driven by short term mercantile interests and by ideological motifs of erecting *transnational* states under the guise of multiculturalism, in disregard of national identity and social cohesion imperatives. The immigrants are young, while the incumbents are old. Dramatic changes are occurring in the ethnic and cultural landscape in Western countries. After having been colonizing the world, they are, in turn, being colonized. While the world is getting more and more nationalistic, notwithstanding the globalization rhetoric, the Western world is turning back to its history. It is shrinking demographically and weakening economically and militarily. Furthermore, it lacks a real long-term demographic vision, which is manifest as we have seen in discussing population policies in developed countries.

The book makes a passing reference to Eastern Europe—specifically, to Russia facing rapid population implosion, having the lowest fertility in the world, low longevity, and massive flight abroad of its people in search of a better life, particularly the young and educated. Add to its ongoing demographic attrition the centrifugal forces within what is called Eurasia (former Soviet Union), difficulties reconciling the “center” (Russia proper) with its “near abroad” (former Soviet

republics). The rise of its giant eastern neighbor, land and resource-hungry China, and the Muslim militancy on its southern flank further compound Russia's long-term problems.

In short, driven by demographic forces, great global transformations are in the making, developments the world has not witnessed since the discovery of the Western Hemisphere and the collapse of the Roman Empire. Grave penalties are in store for those who choose to ignore these real processes. Such is the book's implicit message, at least in my reading.

Missing themes: stationary population and demographic maturity

In my view, there are two important themes missing in the book. They are *stationary population* as theoretical concept and policy vision, and the emerging regime of *demographic maturity*.

Stationary population

It is a truism to say that in a finite world, exponential growth cannot go on forever. Nor can humanity contemplate its own extinction by allowing the decline of population to go forever unchecked. Granted that in an ever-changing world, defining an optimum population is beyond our grasp, but a stationary population is within our reach. Never in modern times were the conditions as ripe as they are now for the realization of one key component of John Stuart Mill's stationary state in most of the world populations, including Canada. Oft-heard claims that Canada needs more people are not backed by evidence at all. Nor is massive immigration justifiable, according to research reported in a recent book by the leading Canadian demographer Jacques Henripin: "... cela n'a pas empêché presque tous les chanteurs politiques de claironner pendant deux décennies que le Canada avait besoin de plus d'immigrants pour des motifs économiques" (p. 55). There are legitimate concerns for social cohesion, as well. Referring to immigration, Henripin writes "... il y a des quantités à ne pas dépasser si l'on veut maintenir une cohésion sociale minimale" (p. 57). It has long been recognised that large scale immigration has no significant effect, if at all, on peoples economic wellbeing (Coleman and Trowthorn, 2004; Denton and Spencer 2003; Dubreuil and Marois 2011). But it might be surprising to many of us, including this reviewer, that massive and indiscriminate immigration, as practiced in Canada in the last two decades or so, has had significant financial costs, as well. According to a study by Herbert Grubel and Patrick Grady (2011), the estimated fiscal burden imposed by the average recent immigrant is \$6,000, which for all immigrants it's a total between \$16 and 23 billion, even though these figures have been contested as far too high by Javdani and Pendakur (2011).

Under stationary conditions there would be less need for immigrants, their selection based on identifiable employment needs and their easier integration into mainstream society. Raising fertility and sustaining it at the generational replacement level (two children per woman) will be a costly proposition, well beyond the current programs of family assistance—but so are the costs of aging, as various studies, summarized by Henripin (2011), have demonstrated. Without being in

itself a panacea for all of humanity's problems, stationary population is an optimal response to the quest for ecological and economic sustainability, national identity, social cohesion, and perhaps world peace. It meets best both the long-term concerns of the ecologists and the short term concerns of the economists. A stationary population in its size and age distribution has significant merits of stability over time.

Demographic maturity

And there is something else important. It seems to me that our demographic community does not quite comprehend that humanity is entering a new age of its demographic evolution—*demographic maturity*, sub-replacement fertility, advanced aging and population implosion being its inherent features. To manage the emerging demographic regime, new ways of thinking about population and innovative policies are called for.

The demography-related governance that is in place in advanced countries is from the demographic age, and it is phasing out. Employment and retirement regulations designed for a young and growing population no longer suit populations that are predominantly old but healthy and capable of being productive, all the more so in the work environment of automated technology. Equally antiquated are the prevailing family assistance policies. Though the maternity instinct may still be there as always, women's conditions have radically changed. The women of today in developed countries, and throughout the modernizing world, are faced with many deterrents to maternity (e.g., widespread celibacy, marital instability, financial insecurity), on the one hand, and with many fulfilling opportunities, financially well rewarded, on the other. So much so that they are left with little incentive to trade them off against the uncertainties of motherhood. "It is easier to bring population down than to make it up" (p. 10), writes John May. Fair enough. And that is why, in order to escape the sub-replacement fertility trap, and to bring fertility rate to, and sustain it at, even a generational replacement level, we need to bring to bear meaningful financial and social rewards to maternity. The current family allowances and other welfare-type assistance to families cannot do that. Societies under a demographic maturity regime may need to have in place permanent "life-sustaining" mechanisms to prevent fertility from sliding ever lower. What is needed is more balanced resource allocation between production and reproduction.

The world is definitely moving into this new age of demographic configuration. I call it *demographic maturity*. The matter is not in the semantic but in the substance. We need to conceptualize this emerging demographic regime and begin to think about ways to manage it. The phrase "stationary population" is mentioned only once in the book (p. 268), and in a different context. The book does speak of post-transitional imbalance. There is some discussion of the *second* demographic transition, and of a *third* one, a *migration transition*. But that is as far as it goes. It is not a reproach to the author. It is rather that our demographic community is still locked in past ways of thinking about population.

General assessment of the book

This is a highly readable book. It presents scholarship at its best. The narratives are enhanced by judiciously selected statistical tables. A motto is placed in the heading of each chapter to set the tone for the substantive discussion. Of particular interest are the many highly enlightening *Focus* themes interspersed throughout the book. These narratives give added substantive value.

The book's sober analysis of the facts and ideas, and the author's intellectual integrity, inspire the reader's trust, enabling him/her to make an informed judgment. For the Western world, sub-fertility and massive immigration are "problems" that need to be addressed in earnest. Not everything can be left to the working of the free market. Population policies do matter. In the author's own words, "The main rationale for this book is that there is no 'end of history' in sight for the designers of population policies" (p. 6).

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