

## CHOICE, RESPONSIBILITY, AND PROBLEMS OF POPULATION

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### 1. LOOKING INTO THE PAST

The further we strain our eyes into the remote past, the more uncertain becomes our assessment of the size of the world's population, whatever the efforts we make and the instruments we use in carrying out such an inquiry. It has been stated that the estimates made for the beginning of the Christian era might be wrong by a factor of two. The figures advanced by archaeologists and those quoted in the Bible from the census of King David are even more divergent. And the extreme conjectures made as to the number inhabitants of North America before 1492 are in a ratio of 1 to 12, and of 1 to 15 for the whole continent. In spite of such uncertainties, it can be plausibly stated that from the birth of Christ until the beginning of the eighteenth century the annual population growth may have been on average well below one per thousand. This means more than a thousand years were needed for the population to double. And if we go even further back in our attempt to quantify population dynamics in the past, to when subsistence slowly began to be achieved by agriculture instead of by simple hunting and gathering, we can assume that there was a much lower rate of population growth.

Overall in this picture we can recognise the domination of the force of mortality. The impact of mortality was twofold. There was the elimination of survivors and the strong limitations placed on the years spent by women during their reproductive age. Equally, there was the factor of prolonged breast-feeding which reduced the duration of the time periods open to conception. In order to resist such conditions, and in order to maintain the population at practically stationary levels, mankind was compelled for a long time to take full advantage of its reproductive potential. The maximum

recorded level of fertility is that experienced by the Hutterites during the period 1921-1930, with an average of 10.9 children before menopause for a woman who married at twenty, and three less if she postponed marriage by five years. This result underlines the importance of marriage habits. What happened before the modern era coexisted with local and general oscillations in the size of populations. The study of certain regions clearly demonstrates the effects of mortality crises. To combat such crises recourse was made to changing marriage patterns and practices. This permitted the recovery of population levels and of related economic standards. Within marriage, unhindered procreation was the normal rule. As a result, a responsible choice about marriage could act as an efficient safety valve in the case of populations where marriage was not universal and took place rather late in life.

## 2. THE DEMOGRAPHIC REVOLUTION

In modern times a turning point in population increase in what have since become the developed countries took place in the eighteenth century. This led slowly but steadily to a new equilibrium between births and deaths. The impact was to be observed first in the control of sickness and mortality, and then in the sphere of fertility. It is not particularly important to try here to clarify what was the most relevant factor in shaping the development of the death rate: the epidemiological component (after the ravages of plague in the seventeenth century this pestilence ceased to wreak havoc); the increase in the availability of food (potatoes and maize may be mentioned); or the innovations introduced by Jenner, and so forth. The result is what really matters to us, and more specifically a major increase in life expectancy and the fact that almost all women are reaching the age of fifty.

With regard to the decline in birth rate – the other phenomenon responsible for this demographic transition – it is to be observed that the research into this area has attributed this development to a series of historical factors: industrialisation, urbanisation, secularisation, schooling, and a number of others. However, each explanation which is cited comes up against exceptions which weaken its general explanatory value. Industrialisation first took place in a country – Great Britain – where the decrease in fertility started late in the day. The same happened in Germany, where, furthermore, for a long time there had been a strong tradition of compulsory schooling. And the first signs of a containment of births appeared in rural

zones of France. Lastly, with regard to secularisation, what connection does it really have with the baby boom anyway? Whatever the causes, in this area, too, it is the results which really matter.

Having made these points, it is easy to understand why it is so difficult to transfer these very debatable interpretations of previous trends in developed countries to what has taken place recently in the rest of the world. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that what happens in the more disadvantaged regions depends largely on their exposure to external influences: the control of mortality is an example of this. Here again, let us pay attention to the results: these underline the very fast transition which is underway in the developing world and show an extreme accentuation of the consequences of a temporary imbalance between the components of growth. In the recent past in Kenya the rates of growth were around 4% per annum, which correspond to a doubling of the population in less than eighteen years. This happened due to a situation in which, while death rates declined much faster than had ever previously been the case, early and generalised marriage, together with high levels of marital fertility, continued to prevail at previous levels. A computation carried out by Ansley Coale – a U.S. demographer – twenty-five years ago helps to clarify what that means. Ansley calculated that, at a rate of increase of 2% per annum (the rate which obtained at that time), in 6,000 years the mass of the world population would reach the volume of a sphere expanding at the speed of light. It should be emphasised that the exceptional level cited for Kenya is inferior to that which, given present controls of sickness and mortality, and with full realisation of its reproductive potential, mankind could possibly obtain.

All this shows that, given the state of our present knowledge, only one conclusion is really possible: the new conditions of the domination of mortality in the long run require the need for a globally inescapable drastic containment of potential fertility – on average a little more than two births per woman. In other words, mankind has built a wall in front of it which blocks its path, and which at present appears insurmountable.

It should be underlined, at this point, that what happened in the developed regions with regard to the dynamics of fertility did not take place under any pressure from above. It occurred as a consequence of free and autonomous decisions, taken at the micro-level of families acting in a certain social, economic, cultural context. The same cannot be said for some countries which are in a state of development: the strenuous campaigns for sterilisation in the history of one specific country, and the persisting policy of the one-child family in another, are prominent examples of this. The

same may be said of certain strong pressures applied by the outside world, and even by international organisations. It is clear that this impinges on fundamental human rights. And here we encounter the core of the problems of today and of tomorrow.

### 3. CHOICE AND RESPONSIBILITY

#### *3.1 At the Micro-level*

'All couples and individuals have the basic right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children and to have the information, education and means to do so; the responsibility of couples and individuals in the exercise of this right takes into account the needs of their living and future children, and their responsibility towards the community'. So dictates the World Population Plan of Action approved in Bucharest in 1974. A richer text, in terms of the concerns of this contribution, was inserted in 1968 into the Pastoral Instruction 'Gaudium et Spes' issued by Vatican Council II. In this, among the values quoted for the guidance of sound personal decisions, spouses were invited to take into account their reciprocal personal good – something which emphasised the shared responsibility of the couple. The principle of freedom of choice for parents as opposed to external interference is thus certainly established. But at the same time it is stated that this fundamental right is linked to responsible choice, and not just to any kind of choice. Responsibility and freedom of choice are complex concepts which need to be examined in detail. I cannot be responsible unless I find myself in a context of freedom which even if limited allows me a real multiplicity of attainable alternatives. Responsible action implies reference to a value and to alternative options; to the knowledge of these latter and of the consequences of the choices which are thus taken; to the availability of suitable means by which to achieve the goal wished for, or which duty demands; to the ability to evaluate and grade alternatives, and to make rational decisions about them. Responsible choice, it is clear, requires personal education.

#### *3.2 At the Level of Governance*

But whose duty and task is it to ensure everybody can have desired and wanted children? Children, indeed, whom one might consciously decide not to have because of circumstances behind one's own control brought

about by social injustice or other people's mistakes and misdeeds. The exercise of responsibility cannot be seen one-sidedly. Otherwise, the right to procreate responsibly, which is strictly linked to that of free marriage, would be practically ignored for those who live in poverty through no fault of their own. Here we encounter the function of government. In fact, a government has a duty, and therefore a right, to engage in initiatives to the best of its cognitive and organisational abilities, for the sake of the higher aims which guide its life.

But it is difficult to speak of interventions in matters relating to demographic policy which do not run the risk of causing more harm than they intend to cure if they are not supported by adequate social policies. Research into the best paths to be followed to ensure a reduction in fertility, while maintaining a variability between families which reflects the free choices taken by the persons concerned, remains incomplete. We have before us a current and shocking demonstration of the eternal problem of the search for a system of social organisation which conserves the ever fragile equilibrium between authority and the consensus of citizens. At the level of individuals, the achievement of a satisfactory solution seems to require the attainment of personal autonomy in conformity with the heteronomy of a social order which permits the maximum perfection of every individual's own being. Without this personal tension, no organisational solution suitable to man, which is carried through by the state, can stand on its own two feet. The same holds true if the present situation of several developed countries is considered. Here the level of fertility is so low that replacement is not achieved. In Italy various sample surveys taken in recent years by an organ of the National Research Council have consistently recorded an ideal number of two children per woman. For several years only two thirds of that level has been reached. In my opinion, this can be seen as an expression of a sort of social illness, which will eventually worsen the problems produced by a rapidly ageing population. Faced with this situation, we seem to need some kind of revolution which carries out a complete restructuring of society as a whole.

### *3.3 At the Level of Society*

Individuals and families on one side, and government or any public authority on the other, are responsible for choices. But they do not operate in a vacuum – they take decisions within the context of society as a whole and its cultural background. To make this point clear, I would like to give an example. In certain populations there is a strong preference – whatever

the reason may be for such a state of affairs – for the birth of a son rather than a daughter. Abnormally high ratios of males over females at birth are thereby consistently registered. Selective abortion is the main cause, and this is not something which is imposed by an authority. Similar results – and this is another example – were observed for two years in the sixties in a technologically advanced country. The reason, this time, was the belief that girls born in those years were liable to produce problems. As a consequence of such behaviour, a portion of males arriving at marriageable age were denied monogamous marriage.

In my opinion, something of the same kind can be seen in certain sad facts which are now before our eyes. Population movements, whether free or forced, have always been important in shaping the territorial distribution of the population. Among these are to be found interventions which have the character of ‘ethnic cleansing’, a policy which sometimes ends in genocide. Such actions may be guided and imposed from above, by people raising them as a flag to bolster their own prestige. But it would be difficult for them to become a mass phenomenon if they were not supported by the cultural background of society as a whole. In such choices there is, I am afraid, a shared responsibility on the part of governors and governed. The most striking development, in recent times, in the area of population movements, is the phenomenon of urbanisation, particularly in developing countries. Political leaders can partly be responsible for this development. The political power of urban concentrations is much higher than that of a dispersed rural population. Because of this fact, it is possible that such leaders provide differential advantages to people living in cities. The usual push and pull forces then become stronger and lead to the unfavourable displacement of people and economic development.

Those in political power and the man in the street come together in the adoption of a position of relative inertia in facing up to the problems of population. Slowly but inexorably these problems will manifest their strong impact on demographic structures and dynamics, and with a number of related consequences. But at a specific moment it is difficult to understand the relevance of these issues to today’s isolated actions which become easily postponed.

#### 4. LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

In this paper attention has not been paid to the well-known extreme variety of demographic situations which are now to be found in different

countries. In the same way I have not dwelt upon the enormous changes which have taken place in the composition and distribution of the population of the world and which will lead to the already mentioned differentials in the growth of the various regions. The purpose has been, rather, to illuminate a long-term horizon which involves the whole of mankind. We have seen that, while we have reached an unprecedented personal freedom of choice in birth regulation, at the same time we are about to experience severe and inescapable constraints.

The achievement of a stationary population level has its costs. There is the risk that reasons for tension could become institutionalised in the case of small families. Interpersonal relations could be impoverished, the dangers of generational conflicts increased, and psychological problems overcome only with difficulty. In general, the educational potentiality of the family could deteriorate. To this can be added the social marginalisation which could be suffered by the much wider band of ageing people. Life would be greyer. In this approaching reality, I see exacting problems emerging which involve the whole of humanity, which, to solve them, will not be able to place trust in science and technology alone. To come to terms with these new realities, man will have to draw upon all his most deeply hidden spiritual energies.