

Do we need a population policy?

Jacques Vallin | February 29, 2016



From the writings of Plato (4th century BCE) on the population of the ideal Greek city, to the famous precept of Jean Bodin (1576) “the only wealth is man”, the desire to influence the size or composition of the population is an ancient one. But highlighting our ancestors’ interest in demographic problems and their quest for solutions does not answer the question of whether a population policy is necessary today. As a policy involves assigning an objective to society and implementing measures to achieve this objective, there are at least two questions to consider: “Are the objectives justified?” and “Are the measures taken both acceptable and effective?” Only the first one is discussed here.

The myth of an optimal number

The existence of an optimal population size for a given territory has long been a subject of debate among economists, and it is now being examined by ecologists. Let’s imagine the very first settlers in a previously uninhabited area. To begin with, they need to increase their numbers as rapidly as possible. As the population grows, it becomes more economically and socially structured, and productivity increases. As time goes by, the process will reverse, however: productivity will fall and living conditions may deteriorate to the point where life expectancy decreases, unless other measures such as out-migration or fertility reduction are implemented to achieve zero population growth. Clearly, this scenario appears to justify a historical cycle of populationist policies, followed later by Malthusian ones.

But this scenario is questionable. Unless we go far back in time to when the first humans spread across the planet, the arrival of modern man in a virgin territory is no more than an academic hypothesis (with a few rare exceptions such as Réunion Island, which was probably uninhabited until the seventeenth century). Over the last thousand years, the colonization of new territories has taken place at the expense of existing populations who used available resources differently and who, more importantly, were much less well-armed to defend their societies and their cultures. In this case, a populationist policy that almost exclusively favours new settlers is much less easy to justify. True, such a policy led to the development of the United States of America, the world’s largest democracy, but was the genocide of the Native American populations a reasonable price to pay?

There are other circumstances in which populationism may be more readily defended. After the Black Death and the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453), for example, the kings of France offered certain freedoms and tax exemptions to migrants who were willing to resettle and start farming again in ravaged areas.

On the Malthusian side, the objective of an optimal population size (corresponding in this case to a maximum acceptable density) cannot be justified, as it disregards the reality of the technical progress that has constantly outstripped the pace of population growth. It is common knowledge that the Dutch, with 400 inhabitants per square kilometre, have a much higher living standard than the Madagascans, with fewer than 40. This is not because they have more available resources, but because of their more advanced agricultural, industrial and commercial technologies.

The population growth

For Malthus, economic production increased arithmetically and would be unable to keep pace with the needs of a population that, for its part, increased exponentially. His idea was used by neo-Malthusians to convince developing countries that birth control policies were needed to slow down excessive population growth. To catch up with rich countries, the poor countries needed to invest massively in order to develop their economy and educate their future workforce. How could they hope to do so if population growth outpaced the increase in production? It was on these grounds that many developing countries implemented sometimes draconian birth control policies.

Paradoxically, while the quarrel between neo- and anti-Malthusians is now largely forgotten, the idea of overpopulation – whether at a local or global level – has been taken up again by certain ecologists who claim that the world would be a better place with a population of just one billion (as in 1800!) rather than nine or ten billion, as will soon be the case. Is this sufficient grounds for a depopulation policy? Hardly. Not only does depopulation raise as many problems as population growth, but implementing such a policy would be highly problematic. Increasing mortality is clearly unacceptable, and emigration is not possible on a planetary scale. This leaves the option of reducing fertility and maintaining it well below replacement level over a long period, which would soon give rise to an economically unsustainable dependency ratio (ratio of young and old people to adults of working age). Ecologists have highlighted two major challenges facing us: climate change and the growing scarcity of basic resources such as water and non-renewable energies. These are indeed crucial issues that must be handled with a stronger political will than is currently the case, but reducing the global population is certainly not a practical solution. Attention should focus more on managing the consequences of past demographic trends than on dreams of returning to a demographic golden age that never actually existed.

The population structure

Population size is not the only population policy challenge. Population structure is also an important factor. Let us consider here only three aspects: age, sex, and ethnicity.

Is there an ideal age composition that a population policy might reasonably seek to achieve? In economic terms, an optimal age structure may be one which minimizes the dependency ratio by maximizing the number of working-age adults. This would entail reducing the proportion of older adults, whose numbers are increasing rapidly in countries in the last stage of the “demographic transition”. But how can this be done? By reducing life expectancy? Who would dare to envisage such an option? By stimulating births to reduce the proportion of elders? Such a measure would raise the proportion of children and increase the dependency ratio. In

countries where the elder population is still small, the proportion of working-age adults can be maximized by a sudden fertility decrease that produces an immediate drop in the proportion of young people. It is this phenomenon that has opened an exceptional demographic window of economic and social opportunity in certain developing countries. But such situations are temporary and short-lived, with potentially damaging long-term after-effects. The ideal is thus to achieve an invariable age structure, but this is only possible in a so-called "stable" population. So the question boils down to whether we want a stable growing population or a stable decreasing one; because in one case or the other, the dependency ratio remains more or less unchanged (more younger people in the former case, more older people in the latter). In fact, sooner or later, both population growth and depopulation are problematic, which leaves us with only one reasonable long-term objective: that of a "stationary" population with a constant size and age composition. But, very likely, this is a purely utopian dream.

What about sex? Until quite recently, the sex ratio at birth seemed to remain unchanged at the rate of 105 boys per 100 girls. Due to male over-mortality, that resulted in an almost perfect balance at childbearing age, which is an ideal situation for monogamist societies. Only exceptional events could disturb the balance and ultimately open the door to demographic policies. After a deadly war, for example, a country can suddenly call upon foreign labour like France did in the 1920s, resulting in a concomitant balance in the marriage market. Recently, the question of gender unbalance has become critical in some countries that have easy access to early diagnosis of fetal sex and that also practice selective abortion. In India (where a woman's status remains very unfavourable) and in China (where the one-child policy reinforced preferences for male offspring), this practice led to a sudden increase in the sex ratio at birth, thus opening a new field for population policies. Is it better to try to stop the phenomenon by fighting the symptom (for instance, by restricting access to diagnosis in order to stop selective abortion) or to try to eradicate the cause by accelerating improvements in the status of women? The debate remains open.

There is no scarcity of demographic policies that favour some ethnic group to the detriment of another one. One of the most extreme ways is genocide (e.g., the Armenian massacre by the Turkish Empire, the extermination of Jews by Nazi Germany, and other genocides in Rwanda, Bosnia, etc.). Not only is this method an unacceptable crime, but the very principle of such a policy like ethnic cleansing is indefensible. Is it enough to simply reject any policies that have ethnic objectives?

The Chinese example shows how ambiguous such an enterprise can be. On the one hand, the one-child policy was attenuated for minorities some decades ago in recognition of their right to reinforce their very weak demographic weight. But on the other hand, Tibet, Sin Kiang and Mongolia were subjected to massive settlements of the Han population, which marginalized and subjugated these autochthonous societies. Without ambiguity, Israel developed a systematic policy of colonial settlement with clear aims to strangle the Palestinian economy and make it impossible to restore these illegally occupied territories in the end. Such policies - although more subtle than genocide - are no less unacceptable.

Thus, the objectives of demographic policies are numerous and varied. Some of them are rather undesirable or even dangerous. Some methods are unacceptable or even criminal. Then there are more equitable and humanitarian means, those that are compatible with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet even when applying them, the question arises: Are they effective?

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