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World Population Policies: Their Origin, Evolution, and Impact

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At the beginning of the 18th century, Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, maréchal de France, sent a letter to Louis XIV, as part of his efforts to persuade the King to help his poverty-stricken subjects. Vauban's attempts to arouse royal empathy with the suffering French masses having proven fruitless, he invoked an ancient axiom of the monarchy, all in capital letters: 'THE GREATNESS OF KINGS IS MEASURED BY THE NUMBER OF THEIR SUBJECTS'. While Louis appeared indifferent to the numerical imperative, Vauban's focus on statistics was picked up by a number of French reform-minded individuals who became more and more interested in the number of Louis's subjects. In the words of Pierre Goubert, 'after the publication of Vauban's *Enquête* of 1697-1700, what is called public opinion' seemed to become passionate about what was not yet demography'.⁽¹⁾ Demography as a seemingly neutral, objective, mathematical discipline went on to develop great influence and respect during the century of the Enlightenment and has only increased its importance in the modern world. Its function as a means of assessing the value of governments has continued to imbue its findings with critical significance.

Demography, a statistical discipline with strong connections to sociology, politics, medicine, and history, operates within well-defined mathematical parameters. And yet, despite its orderly guidelines, the topics it

treats continue to inflame public opinion worldwide. Sexual proclivities, gender issues, women's rights, contraception, abortion, as well as migration, exploding populations and imploding nation states are just some of the hackle-raising areas to be impartially tabulated by demographers. John May, formerly a distinguished expert in demography for the World Bank, and currently Visiting Scholar at the Population Reference Bureau, has brought forth an essential work which manages to encompass human struggles with various demographic issues across the entire globe over the last 50 years. As May convincingly demonstrates, in the last half century every nation, regardless of political orientation, economic status or ecological situation, has been grappling with some population problems, whether they concern too few births or too many, a dwindling workforce or massive unemployment, age imbalance, societal disruption due to immigration or emigration, gender inequality, or environmental issues and governmental responsibility in the well-being of a nation's citizenry.

The numerous questions May so knowledgeably treats cannot be addressed in the confines of a single review, so this article will confine itself to the main focus of his inquiry: the policies various nations and authorities have adopted in order to cope with these problems, which range from worrisome long-term trends to looming emergencies. May examines the elements in state-controlled efforts, concluding that despite opposition to government interference in private lives, "the state remains the most legitimate and natural actor to formulate and implement population policies, as its first obligation is the well-being of its people" (p. 61).

May begins with a sweeping description of world population since 1950, the crucial period of the demographic transition, during which high birth rates and high levels of mortality have to considerable degree given way to lower levels of fertility and longer life expectancy. These two trends, when taken together, have resulted overall in great increases in the number of human beings on the planet. May describes the "dramatic demographic changes" in the world between 1950 and 2010, "as the population grew from 2.5 billion to 6.9 billion" (p. 14). Whether what has been termed the "population explosion" should be considered a blessing or a menace is framed by May within the contrast between the pessimistic view of Thomas Robert Malthus and the initially laissez-faire Marxist perspective, with reference to the more nuanced recent theories of the Danish economist, Ester Boserup. May examines the precise, complex relation between the rate of demographic growth and its socio-economic consequences in developing economies and in the developed world. He analyses the differences between population policies in developing countries and those which have already reached high levels of economic and cultural progress, noting that it has only been since the Second World War "that states began in earnest to influence demographic variables, first by intervening to push back mortality, then by lowering fertility (through family planning programs), and finally by promoting more comprehensive population policies" (p. 42).

Policies in poorer nations faced with overwhelming population increases have ranged from the systematic introduction of contraception and the distribution of birth-control information and supplies, with moderate success, to draconian government regulations imposing sterility, to the furthest extreme, the totalitarian one-child policy in China.

The question of which policies are appropriate in under-developed nations, if they are to avoid being drowned in their own reproductive excess, has proven to be fraught with conflicts over individual rights versus those of the collectivity, and religious opposition to birth control. May devotes a number of special sections, labeled "Focus", to specific areas such as Colombia, Haiti and Ethiopia. His "Focus" on the Vatican, provides a succinct and informative history of attitudes toward conception and contraception affecting a great portion of believers around the world. In a few pages, May describes the rocky road leading from Pope Pius XI's 1930 Encyclical *Casti connubii* (Of chaste wedlock), in which the Roman Catholic Church opposed the Anglican Church, which had just announced toleration of artificial birth control methods at the Lambeth Conference. Pope Pius XII (1939-58), however, in 1951, acknowledged the acceptance of another formula for preventing unwanted conceptions, the so-called rhythm system, which relied on abstinence during periods of the menstrual cycle when women judged themselves to be fertile. This permission to resist conception while avoiding effective contraception was thrown into question with the advent of the pill. May describes the conflicts within the Church during the papacy of John XXIII and Paul

VI, culminating in 1966 when the Pontifical Commission came down, "with a large majority, in favor of the use of modern contraceptive methods".

However, as May explains, "under the influence of a few conservative personalities, a minority report was prepared and given to the Pope whilst the so-called majority report was simply ignored. Thereafter, the church renewed its condemnation of modern contraceptive methods in the famous encyclical *Humanae vitae* of 1968" (pp. 202-4). May goes on to analyse the effects of the Church's eventual intransigence on its efforts to promote responsible parenthood in various parts of the world, and its subsequent resulting "loss of credibility and authority".

Another issue which has proven especially vexing is that of abortion. May demonstrates that "the number of abortions appears to be lower in countries that have both legalized the procedure and provided effective access to modern contraceptive methods" and yet, despite this result, the controversy has grown increasingly polarizing, especially in the United States. "Various constituencies" May reports, "(e.g., the Christian Coalition) and the Republican administrations played abortion politics shamelessly to appeal to their conservative constituencies for electoral gains. The words pro-life and pro-choice became political litmus tests for the Right and the Left, respectively". May analyses the similarities between the increasingly bitter fundamentalist Christian campaign against legalized abortion in the United States and that of the flourishing traditional Muslim faith, noting that in both instances their "social and religious conservatism opposed family planning, reproductive rights, women's empowerment, and Western liberal values more generally" (p. 113).

Despite the abortion disputes, however, unchecked population growth has become increasingly unpopular both on the individual level and in policy circles. May discusses the critical opportunity for rapid economic gain offered by what has been termed the "demographic dividend" – namely, that when birth rates fall this reduces "the dependency ratios between generations and boosts the share of the potential labor force" (p. 48).

May's masterful overview of global population policies covers not only the past and the present but provides a sobering vision of their possible consequences for the future of our world. A burgeoning population on a limited planet has been putting pressures on the environment in ways that are inflicting increasing damage. Air and water pollution, rising sea levels, floods and droughts have become world-wide phenomena, with especially dire consequences in under-developed areas. Governmental interventions, however, have been all but non-existent. May discusses the NAPA (the National Adaptation Programs of Action) findings, that showed whereas "85% of countries that wrote NAPAs cited population pressure as an issue exacerbating the effects of climate change, only six suggested that addressing population should be part of the country's adaptation strategy; two proposed projects included family planning/reproductive health, but no projects were funded" (p. 244).

Quoting Condorcet's reminder that "we have a duty to those not yet born", May concludes his study with the injunction to "muster the commitment to present future generations with an inheritance at least equal, if not better, than the one we had received ourselves".

John May's *World Population Policies* is not only an essential text for specialists in demography but for general readers whose interests are human, global and concerned with long-term realities. Vauban's words to Louis XIV concerning the value of kings is now applicable to national leaders of all statures, but the real ultimate goal remains the same as Vauban's, not the number of subjects but ultimately the well-being of peoples.

Notes

1. Pierre Goubert, *Louis XIV et vingt millions de Français* (Paris, 1966), pp. 14-15. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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