POPULATION POLICY

Paul Demeny
Population Council, New York, USA

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Summary

Population policies reflect the concern of human communities with the size and composition of their membership. The communities in question range from small tribal groups in traditional societies to today's modern politically integrated nation states and, beyond that, to the international community concerned with global population trends. This chapter provides a brief summary of policies practiced prior to the 20th century but its main focus is on contemporary national policies expressing countries' efforts to affect population growth as it may hinder or enhance the perceived welfare of their societies, and on international efforts to coordinate and influence population trends globally. Population growth is also affected by mortality and, in a national framework, by international migration; policies dealing with these issues are treated in other chapters. On the crucial matter of fertility behavior discussed in this chapter, its trends are seen to be primarily reflecting individuals' self interest in their own well-being and in their perception of their children's interest, both powerfully conditioned by the level of economic and social development and by the institutional arrangements prevailing in each society. In many countries, the main thrust of programmatic action when population growth is considered excessively rapid, has taken the form of family planning programs that seek to facilitate access to modern methods of birth control, When developmental and institutional conditions, especially those affecting the status of women, are favorable, such programs, in some cases accompanied by strong administrative pressures, appear to have accelerated the decline of fertility toward replacement levels or in some cases even

below such levels. Concern with rapid population aging and eventual population decline caused by such low fertility in some instances has elicited population policies seeking to stimulate birth rates. Such pronatalist policies thus far have proven at best moderately effective.

1. Introduction

Population policy may be defined as deliberately constructed or modified institutional arrangements and/or specific programs through which governments seek to influence, directly or indirectly, demographic change.

The generality of the definition lends itself to varying interpretations. For any given country, the aim of population policy may be narrowly construed as bringing about *quantitative* changes in the membership of the territorially circumscribed population under the government's jurisdiction. Additions to membership are effected only through births and immigration, losses are caused by emigration and by deaths. Concern with this last component is usually seen as a matter for health policy, leaving fertility and migration as the key objects of governmental interest in population policy.

More broadly, policy intent may also aim at modification of *qualitative* aspects of these phenomena—fertility and international migration—including the composition of the population by various demographic characteristics and the population's spatial distribution.

Furthermore, governments' concern with population matters can also extend beyond the borders of their own jurisdictions. International aspects of population policy have become increasingly salient in the contemporary world.

As policies concerning mortality and international migration (both directly affecting population growth) are considered in other chapters, the discussion below will focus on policies aimed at influencing fertility.

2. Population Control in Traditional Societies

Rulers of any political unit have a stake in the size and composition of the population over which they have authority, hence an incentive to try to influence demographic change in a desired direction. Thus "population policy" may be said to have a long history, starting at least with the empires of the ancient world. Greater numbers tended to connote greater wealth and power, at least for those at the apex of the social pyramid. Measures encouraging marriage and sometimes immigration testify to the prevailing populationist sentiment among rulers throughout history.

But the leverage of the weak premodern state over fertility in traditional societies was necessarily limited. The dominant influence setting the patterns of reproduction was located, instead, in a deeper layer of social interaction. Births, the key element affecting population change, are produced by individual couples—seemingly an intensely private affair yet one in which the immediate kin group and the surrounding local society in which that group is embedded have a material stake. All societies, if at varying degrees,

grant a measure of self-sovereignty to their members. An individual has certain rights over his or her direction in life. But this is always subject to some constraints, not only biological but also social. Well before rights and obligations are formally codified in legal terms, they are established through spontaneous social interaction—a self-organizing process. Restrictions on freedom to act take the form of social expectations and pressures that individuals can ignore only at considerable personal costs to themselves. Typically, there was a strong expectation that men and women should marry and have children. Parental and kin obligations in the matter of bringing up children were well understood by all adults and informally enforced by the community. In most traditional societies there was an expectation that children are to be born to married couples only; that a man can have one wife at a time, and a woman one husband; that a husband is obligated to support his wife and his children; and that he can expect reciprocal services from them. And informal rules shaped by community interest tended effectively to regulate the entry of foreigners.

The fabric of such demographically relevant behavioral stances, supported by internalized personal norms and buttressed by religious injunctions, was a product of social evolution; how effective such institutions were became an important determinant of societal success. As a classic statement of Alexander Carr-Saunders, a prominent British demographer of the interwar years, asserted, groups practicing the most advantageous customs would have an advantage in the constant struggle between adjacent groups over those that practiced less advantageous customs. Few customs can be more advantageous than those which limit the number of a group to the desirable number. Thus in the traditional society there would grow up an idea that it was the right thing to bring up a certain limited number of children, and the limitation of the family would be enforced by convention.

Given the harsh biological and economic constraints premodern societies invariably experienced, that "desirable number" presupposed fairly high fertility: high enough to provide a sufficient margin of safety over mortality. Successful societies—societies that survived to the dawn of the modern era—thus obeyed the biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply, even though such multiplication as a matter of historical record was necessarily very slow. But traditional demographic regimes resulting from spontaneous social interaction achieved modest growth rates at varying levels of fertility and mortality. Early modern Western Europe succeeded in maintaining a relatively low average level of mortality by means of keeping birth rates low, primarily by means of a fairly high average age of marriage and substantial proportions that remained permanently single. A contrasting pattern, such as in India, combined early and universal marriage and a consequent high level of fertility with slow population growth by virtue of death rates that were also high, approximating the level of the birth rate. With respect to the rate of population growth, these different combinations of birth and death rates in traditional societies were closely similar. The potential for rapid population growth that might be triggered by a fall of mortality was, however, much higher when the premodern equilibrium was the result of a combination of high mortality and high fertility.

3. Rationale for Population Policy

Modernity—the rise of effective state formations reflecting the public interest and the

emergence of rapid economic development—brought about the realistic promise of realizing age-old human aspirations for a better life. The state increasingly came to be seen as an institution created by the voluntary association of the individual members of a given society to further their interests. The central function of the state was to produce public goods—goods that individuals cannot secure for themselves. The US Constitution, promulgated in 1789, articulated key items in the collective interest concisely and with the ambition of conveying universal validity. The aim of the Union formed by the People was, in the words of the Constitution's Preamble, to "establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." In pursuing such goals, regulation of immigration into a state's territory is clearly defined as a public good, thus delineating a particular role for population policy. And aggregate fertility may also be construed as a public good, if its level as determined by spontaneous social interaction is too high or too low in terms of the collective interest.

The potential role of the state in regulating immigration is straightforward: individuals wishing to restrict or promote it cannot set up their own border patrols or issue entry visas. Individual preferences in the matter, however, are likely to differ. It is the task of the government to weigh and reconcile conflicting individual desires and come up with a policy deemed the best under the accepted rules of the political process.

To claim a role for the state in the matter of fertility is more problematic. Additions to the population are the result of a multitude of individual decisions concerning childbearing. Within the constraints of their social milieu, these decisions reflect an implicit calculus by parents about the private costs and benefits of children to them, including consideration of the interests of the children themselves. But neither costs nor benefits of fertility are likely to be fully internal to the family: they can also impose burdens and advantages on others in the society. Such externalities, negative and positive, represent a legitimate concern for all those affected. An individual's influence on the fertility of other families, however, is limited: there are no private markets offering preferred patterns of aggregate demographic processes to individual buyers. Remedying such market failure may then be attempted through intervention by the state so as to affect individual behavior in order to best serve the common good—the good of all individuals.

The earliest clear formulation of the population problem as a problem of coordination among individual preferences, hence establishment of the rationale for potential state intervention in the matter of fertility, was given by William Foster Lloyd, an Oxford mathematician and economist, in an essay published in 1833. In the spirit of the Malthusian concerns of his time, Lloyd noted the possibility of overpopulation even under conditions when all families have only the children they actually want and suggested the direction in which remedy ought to be sought. The simple fact of a country being overly populous, he pointed out, is not, of itself, sufficient evidence that the fault lies in the people themselves, or a proof of the absence of a prudential disposition. The fault may rest, not with them as individuals, but with the constitution of society, of which they form part.

Population policy should therefore strive toward institutions and incentive systems—a constitution of society—that provide signals to individuals guiding them to behave in

harmony with the collective interest.

4. Population Policy in the Liberal State

Technological progress and consequent improvements in the standard of living in modernizing societies result in a far more effective control of mortality than was possible in the traditional society. But the fall of the death rate accelerates the rate of population growth, which, in turn, could strain the capacity of the economic system to accommodate the increased population numbers. Falling living standards then would once again increase death rates, reestablishing an approximate balance between births and deaths at a low standard of living. This was the pessimistic central vision of T. R. Malthus's 1798 *Essay*. But this outcome, although held to be highly probable, was, according to Malthus, avoidable. Given sound public policies, there was an alternative to subsistence-level equilibrium, an alternative both agreeable and achievable.

A salient element in the 1798 *Essay*, and in subsequent writings influenced by it, was disapproval of the schemes for poor relief prevailing in Britain and elsewhere in Europe—on the grounds that they were likely to encourage irresponsible reproduction. Efforts of the paternalistic state to reduce poverty were held to be misguided; by stimulating fertility, hence population growth, such efforts would generate only more misery. Malthusians argued that the state's correct stance in demographic matters, as in the economy at large, was laissez faire. This would foster the prudential habits among the general population similar to those that already existed among the propertied classes. It would do so by assuring that the costs of childbearing were not shared by society at large but were primarily borne by the individual couples having children.

Heeding such a prescription did not imply that the state was to play a passive role in demographic matters. Malthus's own writings, most clearly his 1820 tract *Principles of Political Economy*, spell out a broad agenda which expresses the philosophy that came to be dominant in the liberal states of the West in the nineteenth century. Material improvements, such as higher wages for labor, could indeed be defeated if they would be "chiefly spent in the maintenance of large and frequent families." But Malthus also envisaged a different, happier possible outcome: a decided improvement in the modes of subsistence, and the conveniences and comforts enjoyed, without a proportionate acceleration of the rate of population increase.

The possibility of such diametrically different responses to the stimulus of higher wages suggests a large element of indeterminacy in fertility behavior. To Malthus, the causes of these divergent responses were to be found in the circumstances, social and political, in which people lived—in particular, whether those circumstances hindered or rewarded planning for the future. From his analysis he derived a prescription for a population policy that would yield the hoped-for demographic outcome. Among the causes which tend to generate prudential habits in the matter of reproduction, Malthus asserted, the most essential is civil liberty. No people can be much accustomed to form plans for the future, he argued, who do not feel assured that their industriousness will be allowed to have free scope; and that the property which they either posses, or may acquire, will be secured to them by a known code of just laws impartially administered. But it has been found by experience, he added, that civil liberty cannot be secured without political liberty.

Consequently, political liberty was almost equally essential for creating the right social incentives for responsible procreative behavior.

During the long nineteenth century—which may be thought of as stretching to the outbreak of the First World War—the politics in Europe and in its overseas offshoots favored, even if imperfectly, the development of institutional and legal frameworks in harmony with such principles. This, in interaction with economic and cultural changes shaped by the industrial revolution, created a milieu that fostered the prudential habits of parents, rendering the micro-level calculus of the costs and benefits of children increasingly salient. Rising demand for labor, including greater use of child labor, and rising income levels tended to sustain high fertility or even to stimulate it. But rising material expectations, broadening opportunities for social mobility, and the patterns and circumstances of urban living pulled in the opposite direction. This was powerfully reinforced by some programmatic activities that were consistent with the limited role the liberal state claimed in managing the economy. These included public health programs and projects aimed at improving basic infrastructure for transport and communication. And most importantly, the state, or local government, assumed a key role in fostering, organizing, and financing public education. At basic levels school attendance was made mandatory and enforced and, in parallel, labor laws curtailed the employment of children.

Reflecting long-standing cultural values and religious injunctions, and contrary to laissez-faire principles, the liberal state generally banned the spreading of contraceptive information and the sale of contraceptive devices and made abortion illegal. Such restrictions typically remained in effect well into the twentieth century. But by all evidence, any upward pressure on fertility from these restrictions was swamped by the downward pressure on parental demand for children resulting from the state policies and programs just mentioned. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century birth rates were falling rapidly in the countries of the West. In many cases, rates of population growth fell also, despite continuing improvements in mortality. In Europe this trend was facilitated by emigration, which both sending and receiving countries—notably the United States, Canada, and Australia—either positively encouraged or at least permitted.

The stance of the liberal state on population policy thus brought about the prospect of a new demographic equilibrium in the West that could be consistent with continuing material progress: achievement of a stationary population at low levels of fertility and mortality and allowing freedom of movement internationally.

5. Population Policy between the World Wars

The massive losses of life resulting from World War I and from the influenza pandemic in its immediate aftermath, and the sharp drop in the number of births during the war years, were temporary disruptions in the steadily declining trends of fertility and mortality characterizing the prewar decades in the West. Those trends soon made it evident that there is no built-in guarantee that the sum total of individual fertility decisions will eventually settle at a point at which, in the aggregate, the rate of population growth will be exactly zero or fluctuate tightly around a zero rate. Although, owing to relatively youthful age distributions, the rate of natural increase remained positive, by the late 1920s demographers realized that fertility rates in several Western countries had fallen to such a

low level that, in the longer term, natural increase would become negative. This trend became more accentuated and more general under the impact of the Great Depression. Some observers foresaw a twilight of parenthood.

Just as excessive reproduction called for corrective public policies, there were calls for corrective action achieving the opposite result: enhancing fertility so as to assure at least the simple maintenance of the population. In some countries the ban on contraceptives was tightened and the penalties on abortion were increased. These measures had little effect. Neither did, predictably, governmental exhortation appealing to families to have more children.

The most promising avenue for population policy seemed to be to use the instruments available to the state for redistributing income so as to reward demographic behavior considered socially desirable (and to discourage contrary behavior). By the 1930s such pronatalist policies came to be fairly widely if rather tight-fistedly applied in a number of countries. Among Europe's emerging democratic welfare states, Sweden and France were pioneers in providing financial rewards and services in kind to families with children, especially to larger families. (Sweden, however, also allowed liberal access to contraception.) Similar policies were applied with equal or greater vigor in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

Invariably, the proponents of such policies claimed some results in terms of birth rates somewhat higher than would have been expected in their absence. But the latter quantity is a hypothetical one, which introduces a necessary caution to such claims. More pertinently, when average fertility is low, the birth rate in any given year is an unreliable measure of long-run fertility. Women have considerable latitude to time the birth of their children earlier or later, without necessarily affecting the number of children they ultimately wish to have. Although shifts in the timing of births can have a not-negligible effect on population growth—decreasing it when the mean age of childbearing rises and increasing it when the mean age of childbearing falls— pronatalist policies primarily seek to affect that lifetime total of births per woman rather than aiming at their particular sequencing of the birth of their children over the reproductive life span.

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Biographical Sketch

Paul Demeny is Distinguished Scholar at the Population Council, New York, since 1989. He holds a Ph.D. in economics from Princeton University. He served on the faculties of Princeton, the University of Michigan, and the University of Hawaii, reaching the rank of full professor of economics in the latter two universities. As a researcher, he was associated with Princeton's Office of Population Research and served as Associate Director of the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan. He was founding director of the East-West Population Institute at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. Between 1973 and 1988 he was vice president of the Population Council and director of the Council's Center for Policy Studies. He is the founding editor of the journal Population and Development Review and serves as its editor continuously since 1975. He is a former president of the Population Association of America and a Laureate of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population. He is an External Member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.