

The Idea of a Second Demographic Transition in Industrialized Countries

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At the end of the 19th century several French scholars noted that a remarkable change was taking place in the population of their country. The number of children per family declined and that clearly as the result of deliberate efforts to reduce fertility within marriage. It was soon understood that the voluntary limitation of marital fertility was a revolutionary novelty and the term 'demographic revolution' was, in fact, the original term used to describe it. Efforts to explain what was happening began almost immediately. Interestingly enough these first explanations assumed the phenomenon reflected what people wanted out of life. Towards the end of the Second World War, and also after it, American scholars took the lead in the discussions about the demographic changes that were taking place. As a result the explanations preferred became more economic in nature and the term 'transition' replaced the term revolution. The changes in demographic behaviour were considered to be mainly a function of progress in society. Notestein, who played a crucial part in the formulation of the demographic transition theory, stressed the overriding importance of mortality decline and the impact of the modernization process in people's lives and in society as a whole. He concluded that the demographic transition was likely to be a universal phenomenon; all countries were bound to pass through it once they had achieved the level of development required.

It was understood by all knowledgeable people that the decline in fertility was an adjustment made necessary by the decline in mortality. The latter had resulted in unsustainably high levels of natural population growth. The long term demographic balance had been upset; consequently a new balance had to be established at low levels of both mortality and fertility. The very appealing assumption was that we would move from one long term quasi-equilibrium to another. As Bongaarts states in a recent paper:

'If fertility in contemporary post-transitional societies had indeed levelled off at or near the replacement level, there would have been limited interest in the subject because this would have been expected.' Understandably, he then continues as follows: 'However, fertility has dropped below the replacement level -sometimes by a substantial margin- in virtually every population that has moved through the demographic transition. If future fertility remains at these low levels, population will decline in size and age rapidly.'

While there may be an element of postponement of births involved in the very low levels of fertility currently observed, signs are that fertility will continue to stay at a level below that required for the replacement of generations. This will result in a new demographic imbalance. The effects of this new imbalance are already becoming visible. The gradually increasing disequilibrium apparently generates a compensatory trend in the third demographic factor of the classical demographic balancing equation: migration.

If now asked to define the essential difference between the first and second demographic transitions, I would simply say, that while the first, the traditional demographic transition, was a long term consequence of the decline in mortality, the second transition should be interpreted as a consequence of fertility declining way below the levels long thought plausible.

In my presentation I will present a model of the two demographic transitions, will discuss the origin and scope of the concept of a Second Demographic Transition in industrialized societies, and review the evidence to date. I shall also discuss possible explanations and the likelihood that the phenomenon will, again, be quasi-universal.