Chapter 1
The Population Controversy and Beyond

The two intellectual figures who dominated the whole of the nineteenth century, Malthus and Marx, were and still are systematically opposed. A "clash of prophets" claimed in 1970 the title of an American textbook, which usefully provided large excerpts of what Marx and Engels wrote against Malthus. According to current understanding, Malthus is hostile to an excess of population because it causes social sufferings, while Marx is favourable to demographic growth in so far as a large proletariat is a factor aggravating the contradictions of capitalism. This is unfortunately an oversimplification and a few scholars have long established that in his later works Malthus seriously retrenched from his earlier opinion: population, far from being redundant, might well be insufficient to ensure sustained economic growth. As for Marx, he proves extremely ambivalent towards Malthus, simultaneously denouncing the sycophant of the Tories while claiming him to be an economist far superior to Ricardo. To be more precise, Malthus and Marx can be reasonably be opposed only in so far as their *demographic* theories are concerned, and again only if one refers to the first edition (1798) of the*Essay on the Principle of Population*. As soon the analysis is broadened to the later editions of the *Essay* and to the economic writings of Malthus, it is clear that he constantly raised the same question: when considered as an economic variable, how does population fit into the analysis of economic growth? Marx also addressed the problem, assuredly less obsessively and both Marx and Malthus were concerned with growth and not *equilibrium*, a major difference from the orthodoxy of the classical school. From the same starting analytical standpoint, Marx established a very different diagnosis from that of Malthus and built a social doctrine no less divergent: there was no way out of increased poverty and class conflicts were unavoidable.

What was left to lesser thinkers to say about one of the major social issues raised by industrialisation? Whereas important scholars concentrated on the English scene, relatively little is known about nineteenth controversies over population debates in France. They are dealt with here and again sweeping generalisations prevail. The French liberal economists, who prolifically wrote on population at the onset of the industrial revolution in France (1840–1870) are commonly assumed to be the uncompromising keepers of the Malthusian faith. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's views are usually considered as those of a socialist, who shared with Marx a vehement denunciation of the very same capitalist society which the French economists

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praised during exactly the same decades. Again it would be too simple if that sketchy opposition were true. As for the so-called neo-Malthusians, a closer study reveals them to be *anti*-Malthusian, not only, as it is often believed, at the doctrinal level of the plea for contraception, but by questioning the very principle of population which constitutes the core of the Malthusian theory. A careful examination of Proudhon's conceptual framework shows that his ideas differ from Marx on two fundamental points. Far from being a materialist in the Marxian sense, his thought has a strong metaphysical dimension, in which the idea of God is central. He also pays a great deal of attention to what should be a *moral* demographic behaviour, a doctrinal preoccupation totally absent from Marx's writings. Such is the rather puzzling scene of the nineteenth century, as far as ideas on population are concerned in France, not to mention the fact that the stage was also quite encumbered: radicalism (although it was declining along with Godwin's fading star), Christian political economy, the social catholics in France and later the hygienist movement. Much the same can be said about other European countries.

Theoretical Progress and Affiliations

Is it possible to escape these moving sands by safely confining oneself to the more tranquil path of the history of ideas, and to the analysis of the progressive construction of demography as a science? After all since Malthus, the French liberal economists, Proudhon and Marx claimed in turn to have produced a *theory* of population, we would therefore expect some sort of a continuously enriched scientific corpus, like a majestic river growing thanks to successive confluent streams. Indeed there was a vast circulation of ideas in an intellectual space transcending the borders of nation-states. The English political economist Malthus was inspired by his compatriots Wallace and Petty, but the idea of an imbalance between *vis nutritiva* and *vis generativa* had been clearly formulated by Botero in Italy in 1635. Inspired by the French physiocrats as well as by Ricardo, Marx tried to revolutionise an economic system that was firmly entrenched in English capitalist society.

But what is under question is precisely the very idea of progress. Indeed the French economists (as well as Marx) are *post*-Malthusians, and not only chronologically. But did their population laws progress from the base line drawn by Malthus. Were they so to speak more proven? Letting aside Proudhon's disconcerting computations, the French economists made a major contribution to what was to become the modern economic theory of fertility. According to the *standard of living argument* (which they actually borrowed from English writers) the increase in welfare automatically induces the desire to reduce fertility, whereas Malthus had stated the opposite causal relationship. Progress can also be assessed by looking at the problem from the angle of the progressive construction of the theory of population. Actually, demography stands out among the social sciences because of the paucity of theory, there being only one model, namely the demographic transition, formulated in 1934

by Landry.[1] The theory of the demographic transition is the overwhelming dominant explanation of the past of European populations. As is known, the demographic transition is no more than a generalisation based on available long term statistical series of deaths and births in several European countries. For centuries the mortality rate compensated for the birth rate, with no overall demographic growth. Then the transition began with a first stage of a declining mortality rate (except in France), while fertility remained high, hence an accelerating pace. Then again a decline followed in the birth rate, now resulting in a more and more slow growth. At the end of the process (towards the end of the nineteenth century and until the end of the Second World War) both rates were low and since they compensated each other, once again population grew slowly. Now, if it is recalled that Malthus and Marx were acute and widely-read observers of nineteenth century England, it is tempting to relate their theory to the stages of the transition. We would then have the possibility to reveal a continuum between past and present theories. Let us examine this possibility and assume that the Malthusian system of 1798 expresses the demographic logic and equilibrium prevalent before the advent of demographic transition (high fertility and high mortality), while Marx writing in the 1860s would somehow echo the demographic regime characterising the second phase of transition (drop in the death rate followed by lower fertility). Transition would then be a powerful synthesis of Malthusian and Marxist laws on population. The idea is attractive, but the first claim, as will be demonstrated in the chapter on Malthus, does not hold. It applies at the most to the first Malthusian model of regulation through mortality, but it does not take into account later models where Malthus observes that the middle-classes, by and large, practised prudential restraint in England during the years 1820–1830. It is equally questionable to link the second phase of transition to Marx. He was certainly interested in capitalism in its most ruthless form, but if the fertility decline can be explained as part of capitalism's evolution, it is more with regard to the half-century that followed (1870–1914) the publication of *Das Kapital* in 1867. There was a general rise in the standard of living and an improvement in the status of women as well as a rise in the cost of child-rearing due to the increase in the number of years spent in school, a rise in the expenditure on housing and health-care, a demand for skilled workers for industrial production, etc. Looking at the demographic transition as a synthesis of a large set of demographic facts, one must therefore give up this

[1] But the illustrative data gathered subsequently (in Europe and the industrialised countries, and later in the developing countries) led to the conclusion that there are so many different paths leading to the end of transition that ultimately it is the parameters of the model that are really important (Coale, 1973). Finally, later efforts at abstraction and modelling, particularly the theory of socio-cultural modernisation formulated by Thompson (1929) and Notestein (1953), were marked by a strong ideology which further weakened the model's theoretical validity and therefore its universality. The article by Szreter (1993) on the historical and political reasons for the success of Notestein's modernisation theory as compared to the poor reception of Thomson's theory is worth reading.

alluring idea that it "inspired" these great intellectuals during each of its phases. Nor, if the transition is considered as a theory, can it be regarded as a logical continuation from Malthus' and Marx's theories. There is a good reason for pleading this case.

Demographic Theory and Economic Theory

One also tends to forget that from the eighteenth century onward population became an *organic* part of economic thought as seen in the inevitable chapters on population in treatises on economics. So it is not possible to analyse Malthus' theory independently of his economic theory and population as a concept finds its logic in the field of economics where it was initially theorised, much before it became a demographic concept. What is true of Malthus as a mainstream thinker applies even more to his strongest opponent, Marx, whose economic theories formed the basis of his population law which he opposed to that framed by Malthus. Consequently, the problem is that of the epistemological status of demography in relation to economics, which has direct implications with regard to the mere possibility of writing a history of the theory of population. One is reminded of Canguilhem's position vis-à-vis the life sciences. He rejects the very idea of looking for precursors to reconstruct the history of a science and calls it "the most evident symptom of the incapability of epistemological criticism." As a matter of fact, if a concept is meaningful only within a given system and historical context, a precursor cannot simultaneously belong to his time and to a later period. What is being questioned is the historical contextualisation itself. "So the precursor is a thinker who the historian believes he can remove from his cultural background and insert into another. This amounts to considering concepts, discourses and speculative or experimental actions as capable of being moved and replaced in an intellectual context where the reversibility of relations has been obtained by forgetting the historical aspect of the object he is dealing with."[2] So what about demography?

As a first step in our analysis, if we consider the population theory as a subset of the economic theory, it will be observed that its concepts, and particularly the most central of them all, the demand for labour, are not really "exported". This lessens, at least in the case of demography, the impact of Canguilhem's criticism. As for Malthus and Marx, who illustrate the two theoretical streams that succeeded one another between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is evident that the latter borrowed from the former, but this does not justify the powerful accusation that "the same word does not mean the same concept."[3] But by the same token, this organic relationship between demography and economics is structured so differently that it

[2] Canguilhem, 2002: 20–22.

[3] 2002: 177.Contrary to Canguilhem's radical position, one can quote the idea that was developed from the physiocrats to Malthus and Marx, that all revenue is not automatically reinjected into the economic circuit, giving rise thereby to under-consumption due to a real lack of demand (see Blaug, 1986: 35).

is not possible to find an intellectual affiliation between a thinker and his followers that could be deemed complete and perfect. As for Marx, his "population law" is inseparable from the theory of capital accumulation and there is no epistemological discrepancy except, as we shall see, in his writings prior to 1859. Malthus poses a more formidable problem. His demographic theory is as coherent as his economic theory and he made remarkable sociological observations. He was after all an Anglican pastor who never stopped affirming that his work was a contribution to the implementation of the Creator's designs. But if we take into account his entire work, we are struck by serious theoretical contradictions. Far from adhering to his initial denunciation of the risk of overpopulation, Malthus seriously foresees the risk of an insufficient growth. It will be shown that only an interdisciplinary approach can avoid such contradictions, reconcile the demographic viewpoints of the economist, the empirical sociologist, the man of the cloth and, finally, establish epistemological coherence. We thus find ourselves far from the simplistic neo-Malthusian interpretation that Malthus' thinking can be reduced to the idea of regulating population growth by a decrease in fertility. And to conclude our discussion on the problem of theorisation in the field of demography, we will agree with Canguilhem who says, "Paying attention to epistemological obstacles will allow the history of science to be a true history of thought."[4] The line of research followed in this book enables us to easily incorporate the classical typology of population theories without confining ourselves to it alone, to explain their origin and the internal logic of their evolution or, on the contrary, their absence in a given society and in a particular period. What can be done when dealing with demographic doctrines?

Demographic Doctrines and Ideology

It should first be noted that as is the case for theories, doctrinal affiliations should not be taken for granted. The best example is Malthus, who must not be considered as a precursor of the so-called "neo-Malthusians". As mentioned above, the divergence has a bearing on a crucial issue, that of contraception. For the wretched proletarians, whose fertility was unlikely to diminish with economic progress, birth-control methods seemed a most practical means of escaping poverty, and was overtly advocated, while Malthus always refused to recommend it. As Keyfitz put it, "It is a strange injury that posterity has inflicted on Malthus when its calls contraception 'malthusian' or 'neo-malthusian"'.[5]

All the writers dealt with here were keen observers of the European societies in which they lived. They were eager to describe, measure and analyse, not for the sake of a positivist attitude but because they wanted to influence the course of events, at a time when industrialisation had deeply shaken the social, economic, moral and political patterns inherited from the past. Viewed from that angle, their demographic

[4] Cangilhem, 2002: 177.

[5] Keyfitz, 1983: 5.

doctrines must be examined within the historical context. A doctrine being a body of normative arguments, based on value systems, which define the goals to be attained, either general (the growth or control of population) or specific to major demographic variables (in the past, it was more often than not fertility, marriage and migration rather than mortality), by nature the goals of a demographic doctrine cannot be purely demographic. The above example shows clearly enough that the doctrinal goal was the welfare of the poor, as a response given by the French bourgeoisie to the sufferings created by industrialisation. Reducing fertility is evidently not a desirable objective per se, it is so only in view of social, economic, political or ideological goals. Let us turn to the other branch of the alternative: *increasing* fertility can be desirable from the point of view of the country's military, economic, fiscal, social or political requirements. It is therefore important to understand, keeping in mind the economic, social and political context prevailing at the time of formulating any given demographic doctrine, to what stakes these doctrinal positions responded. One may discuss the legitimacy of increasing or restricting fertility, recommend marriage at an earlier or later age, but to a large extent the examination of the demographic doctrines in the following chapter will be inspired by the central ideological conflict of the nineteenth century, the defence of the triumphant bourgeois values and their contest by the heralds of the poor.[6] In brief, demographic doctrines can be considered as the subsets of these ideologies. Now the prime role of all ideologies being to provide solutions to the problems of their times, they are likely to change in order to find satisfactory solutions for new or unforeseen problems. Like any other ideology, doctrines on population are thus domed to be abandoned when they become obsolete and are no longer capable of providing ideologically satisfactory interpretations of historical change. The decline of the Malthusian doctrine (as commonly understood, i.e. the condemnation of excess demographic growth) during the second half of the nineteenth century is a magnificent *cas d'école.*

Interpreting Theories and Doctrines

Demography stems from a double line of historical descent. On one hand, political arithmetic, whose main contribution was the construction of an original tool, the mortality table, and was nothing but applied statistics focused on very concrete actuarial problems, without any theoretical ambition. Political arithmetic gave birth to what is now regarded as the heart of the discipline, namely *population dynamics* (referred to in France as demographic analysis). On the other hand, from the sixteenth and seventeenth century political and moral philosophy, relayed from the eighteenth century by political economy, provided the concepts and intellectual frameworks to understand and analyse demographic behaviours. They are the classical foundations

[6] In a democracy nobody would contest the validity of protecting life and contrary to other variables, there is total consensus on mortality. Only under totalitarian regimes, particularly Nazism, there was no hesitation in recommending euthanasia for the mentally and physically handicapped under the pretext of protecting the country's higher interests.

of today's *population studies*. Among these concepts, the principle of rationality, inherited from both the English Utilitarism and the French Enlightenment, underlies modern demographic theories, particularly those pertaining to mobility (the so-called neo-classic theory of international migrations) or to human reproduction (the economic theory of fertility).[7]

To analyse theories as well as doctrines, this book borrows from both conceptions of demography. Demographic facts are taken into account, in as much as the authors were concerned with the heritage of political arithmetic and more generally with population dynamics. By "facts", we do not mean of course what we now know of the demographic dynamics of the nineteenth century, but those data they had access to and which they used to support their theoretical or doctrinal statements. Malthus' travels in Europe and his wide readings served him to confirm his central argument that if population had not grown in a geometrical ratio, it was because it was universally checked, except in the United States of America. More interestingly, some facts were ignored although they were largely publicised. If major intellectual figures such as Malthus, Marx or Proudhon, and if excellent experts like the French economists (who lengthily commented the 1846, 1856, 1861 and 1866 censuses, and the cholera epidemics of 1832 and 1854), ignored some facts, there must be good reasons for that, and they are worth elucidating. We shall pay particular attention to the internal coherence of what they wrote not for the sake of our own intellectual satisfaction, but because it raises the question of the causes and significance of evident inconsistencies. Even if Skinner is right to denounce "the myth of coherence"[8], we shall try to reconcile conflicting or inconsistent *demographic* views, by focusing on other dimensions of the author's thought such as political philosophy or economic theory. An author can be inconsistent in his analysis of a given demographic fact because of ideological biases which force him to do so. Only when no coherence is found at any analytical level of analysis, may we conclude that serious intellectual pitfalls exist. The French economists and Proudhon are not free from such an interdisciplinary screening, but more surprisingly it is also true of Malthus and Marx. Social, economic and political facts are no less important than the demographic ones. Malthus, the French economists and Marx commented upon short-term economic crises. Marx made massive use of social surveys and Engels' survey on Manchester is well known, but at least three major figures among the French economists (Villermé, Reybaud, Blanqui) undertook field surveys which are

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[7] This hybridisation has produced a permanent tension between theory and empiricism which could have been fruitful, but which often produced two types of results: either descriptive statistical works without a theoretical base or research work having ambitions of producing theories which have not been empirically confirmed due to lack of data (e.g. mortality models). In such a situation, it is difficult to trace the origin of the transition theory because the advance of political arithmetic in the seventeenth century was not incorporated in the transition structure and also because the inventors of transition did not take into account Adam Smith's economic theory on the demand for work formulated in 1776. Transition confines itself to the gross mortality rate that is compared with the birth rate while ignoring the mortality tables because different analytical processes are involved. Coontz's book (1961) is one on the most interesting attempts to theorize demography on the basis of the concept of the demand for labour.

[8] Skinner, 1969: 16–22.

valuable testimonies of the social condition of the industrial workers throughout France, not to mention many books and articles devoted to *La question sociale*.

Before the age of Malthus and the birth of demography, attention was paid to population, indeed not in modern terms, notably by Plato, the mercantilists and the physiocrats. In order to interpret what they wrote, we have no other choice, as was noted above, than to refer to the most legitimate intellectual field into which we can enter them. Philosophy, and its two major branches, moral and political philosophy, is an evident choice when reading Plato, the mercantilists and the physiocrats. For the mercantilists and the physiocrats, political economy must enter the lice.[9] What economic or philosophical stakes are to be considered in the nineteenth century? Let us briefly quote social inequality and access to welfare, social and economic justice, the control of political power by the few versus democratic legitimacy, the potential ethical conflict between the liberty of the individual and his responsibility, and last but not least in such an unstable century, the dialectics between revolutionary movements and the defence and enforcement of social order.

If these questions are of primary concern when dealing with demographic doctrines, they are also important for theories. A careful study of their writings reveals that the accepted distinction between theories and doctrines must be questioned. Their theories were grounded on their doctrines, in the sense that central theoretical concepts were in fact constructed on premises which were directly borrowed from doctrines. The most striking example is the central argument Malthus uses to demonstrate that a sustained economic growth is possible, a purely psychological conception of human indolence, and he goes as far as asserting that God wisely gave the human species a high reproductive power: it would compel man to work harder produce more to feed his offspring, hence consume more, which in turn guaranteed at the macroeconomic level the maximisation of economic growth. Such an argument, clearly derived from the utilitarian philosophy, is no more than a purely moral value judgement on mankind.

To sum up, the following chapters deal simultaneously with doctrines and theories, paying special attention to the coherence of the overall intellectual argument. This coherence has two dimensions, external, meaning it is consistent with facts as they were known by the author; internal, by which we imply that there are no contradictions in the conceptual construction. Both types of coherence are assessed from an interdisciplinary point of view, in order to avoid a careless dismissal of what is written because, so to speak, of the somewhat short-sighted vision induced by a monodisciplinary analysis. Such is the methodology used to achieve the purpose of the book, which is to provide an evaluation of the exact place of the Malthusian theories and doctrines in the nineteenth century, beyond the shortcomings of the classification between pro- and anti-populationists. Why France? The debate is of particular historical relevance in a country well-known to be obsessed with demography as a condition to its grandeur. . .

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[9] On Plato and on the physiocrats, see Charbit, 2002a; 2002b.