

## ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF MARXIST THEORIES OF POPULATION

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*Résumé* — Alors que Marx s'est occupé à formuler une théorie démographique dans une société capitaliste, les écrivains marxistes d'après ont fait face à un assortiment différent de points et ont été motivés par un assortiment différent d'affaires. En conséquence, les opinions socialistes contemporaines sur la population diffèrent considérablement souvent des premières formules marxistes. Cette étude retrace le développement des théories socialistes et compare les approches des écrivains marxistes au-dedans et au-dehors des pays socialistes. Ayant à faire face à des problèmes économiques et démographiques pressants, les écrivains soviétiques et chinois sont arrivés à plaider pour un rôle d'intervention croissante de la part de l'Etat par rapport aux questions démographiques. En contraste, les Marxistes en dehors du bloc socialiste se concentrent sur les problèmes des nations en voie de et rejettent l'opinion que les programmes de la régulation démographique sont nécessaires. Suivant une ligne marxiste plus traditionnelle, ils soutiennent que les problèmes des nations en voie de développement découlent de leur status dépendant dans le système économique mondial et ne peuvent donc être résolus que par le développement socialiste indépendant.

*Abstract* — While Marx was concerned with building a theory of population in capitalist society, later Marxist writers have faced a different set of issues and have often been motivated by a different set of concerns. As a consequence, contemporary socialist views on population often differ considerably from earlier Marxist formulations. This paper traces the development of socialist theories and compares the approaches of Marxist writers inside and outside the socialist countries. Confronted with pressing economic and demographic problems, Soviet and Chinese writers have come to argue for an increasingly interventionist role on the part of the state. By contrast, Marxists outside the socialist bloc focus on the problems of the developing nations and reject the view that programmes of population control are necessary. Following a more traditional Marxist line, they argue that the problems of developing nations result from their dependent status in the world economic system and thus can be resolved only through independent socialist development.

*Key Words* — **population theory, Marxist theory, population policies**

In his 1959 review of theories of fertility, Professor David Eversley (1959:160) remarked that "the socialist attitude towards population awaits fresh analysis." Twenty-four years later, one would be equally justified in making the same claim. The lack of attention paid to the development of socialist theory stems from several sources. The first is that demographers, in contrast to sociologists and philosophers, are not much given to examining their intellectual roots (cf. Petersen, 1979). The second, and perhaps more important, is that the history of socialist population theory constitutes difficult terrain for the intellectual historian. Marxist analyses of population, including those of Marx and Engels, are often sketchy and frequently polemical. Charting the development of socialist thought requires piecing together many fragments and drawing out ideas from works which touch only marginally on the question of population.

In this paper, we will not attempt to recount the history of socialist population theory. Instead, we will attempt to identify significant moments in the development of socialist theory and to outline the most important trends in contemporary Marxist thought.

### *Marx and Engels on Population*

While attempts to build a socialist theory of population pre-date Marx (United Nations, 1973:46), modern-day approaches clearly trace their beginnings to the writings of Marx and Engels. Marx's work on population has received considerable attention, but the picture of his ideas which emerges is not always an accurate one: his views are often portrayed as simply a reaction against the work of Malthus (Petersen, 1964:72-89). It is, of course, true that Marx reserved some of his harshest words for Malthus, and it is probably also true that the positive view of population growth both he and Engels held and that has continued to characterize socialist thought was, in part, a reaction to the Malthusian view. Nevertheless, Marx's concern with population extended beyond a mere rebuttal of Malthus, and population variables played a significant role in his theory of capitalist development. In his writings, he made serious, if sporadic, attempts to come to terms with a number of important demographic questions. In each case, he attempted to show how demographic patterns were shaped by the operation of the capitalist economic system. While the result was something less than a fully-developed theory of population, Marx did manage to sketch the outlines of such a theory and to indicate the direction he thought future analyses of population should take. However, as we shall see, later attempts to apply Marx's analysis of population to both capitalist and non-capitalist societies have frequently strayed from the path which Marx outlined, and, more importantly, have rarely advanced the cause of building a genuine Marxist theory of population.

### *Early Socialist Views*

The early years after Marx's death were a time of controversy and ferment in socialist circles, and the spirited debates which occurred often extended to population questions. All across Europe, socialist thinkers struggled with both ideological issues and practical political questions, making these years among the most exciting in the history of socialist thought. It is not essential to follow these debates in detail, but it is important to note several developments of particular significance for later thinking.

Among the most important was the changing nature and focus of socialist writing on population in this period. As was noted, Marx was primarily concerned with developing an understanding of the role of population in capitalist society and disproving the Malthusian view of the problem. In his work, he paid little attention to the political controversies surrounding such issues as the rise of the birth control movement (Petersen, 1964:90-102). Later socialist writers found themselves in a quite different situation (Bebel, 1970; Lenin, 1963). Deeply involved in the turbulent politics of their times, they were faced with the problem of developing a coherent ideological position on such population-related issues as the correct socialist response to the birth control movement, the role of women in socialist society, and the proper demographic strategy of the working class under capitalism.

In coming to terms with these issues, they made important contributions to the evolving socialist position on population. Lenin's (1963) argument in favour of unrestricted access to the means of fertility control, and the contention of a number of socialist writers that the improving position of women under socialism would lead to a decline in the rate of population growth (Bebel, 1970:370), had great influence on later socialist thought. Seldom, however, were such arguments placed within the context of a socialist theory of population. In taking up a number of critical issues that Marx and Engels had passed over, the writers of this period helped to fill out the socialist view of population, yet the sum total of their contributions amounted to something less than an integrated theory of population processes.

### *Soviet Views on Population*

The next stage of development opens with the revolution in Russia. It would be hard to

overestimate the importance of this event for the history of socialist thought. The existence of a society committed to building socialism brought about a re-orientation in socialist thought and presented population theories with a new set of problems. On the ideological level, they were confronted with the task of developing a theory of population under socialism with only general guidance from the classical sources. On the practical level, Soviet leaders were faced with formulating a population policy in the midst of real economic and political constraints.

In this struggle between pragmatic and ideological considerations, it was the former which held sway. Under the pressure of circumstances, the Soviets introduced policies designed to achieve specific demographic goals, but made little attempt to link these policies to any broader demographic theory. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the Soviet view has gradually drifted away from the traditional Marxist view of population as well as from the views of neo-Marxist writers outside the socialist countries.

In the immediate post-revolutionary period, no consistent policy on population emerged (Geiger, 1968; Besemer, 1980). Although the regime was basically pro-natalist, policies such as those designed to break down the traditional family and to promote greater equality between the sexes were more likely to lead to a slowdown in the rate of population growth and indeed fertility did decline in the decades following the revolution (Coale *et al.*, 1979). With this decline came major changes in the nature of Soviet family and population policies. The years after 1926 saw the introduction of increasingly conservative legislation on matters pertaining to the family, as well as measures designed to boost the rate of population growth. Chief among these were the ban on abortion instituted in 1936 and the tax placed on single persons and childless couples in 1941. Again, these new policy measures were accompanied by little in the way of ideological or theoretical justification. Pronouncements on population issues continued to follow an extreme anti-Malthusian line but contained no new ideas on the role of population in socialist society nor any rationale for the use of direct measures to stimulate population growth.

The post-Stalin era saw a continuation of the trend toward a more interventionist approach to population questions in socialist societies. Ideologically, however, the Soviets held to a traditional anti-Malthusian position. While the rhetoric was toned down, the Soviets continued to argue that rapid population growth was not a problem in either socialist or non-socialist societies, and hence, population control programmes were not needed. The Soviet view, as expressed at meetings sponsored by the United Nations and other international agencies, consistently opposed an emphasis on family planning as a solution to the problems facing the lesser-developed countries (Symonds and Carder, 1973). Yet the Soviets made no real effort to link their strong opposition to population control in the developing countries with their increasing commitment to the use of interventionist schemes in their own country. The steps being taken in the field of policy were not supported by developments in theory and ideology.

The 1960s saw the beginnings of a re-evaluation of Soviet views on population. The U.S.S.R. and other Eastern European countries were faced with a number of important demographic issues. The enduring effects of the huge losses of population suffered during World War II combined with declining rates of fertility to produce serious demographic and economic difficulties (Heer, 1977). Moreover, the Soviet Union was faced with the additional problem of marked regional variations in rates of population growth (Coale *et al.*, 1979). At the same time, even observers within the socialist countries were becoming alarmed at the acceleration of population growth in the lesser-developed countries. As a response to this changing situation, population policies both inside and outside the socialist nations received new attention, and the Soviets, in particular, became increasingly attracted

to a more interventionist approach. Starting from the famous remark of Engels that "if communist society were ever forced to regulate the production of people ... it could do so without difficulty" (quoted in Urlanis, 1970:1), Soviet and Eastern European demographers and policy makers argued for the adoption of measures to affect the course of population growth. The result was the introduction and strengthening of a number of policies designed to make it easier for women to combine work and family responsibilities (Heer, 1977). These programmes, it was hoped, would boost the levels of fertility and population growth. Similar measures had, of course, been used prior to this period, but in these years an explicit attempt was made to identify such measures as constituting a part of an integrated population policy.

Despite these moves toward a more interventionist position with respect to population issues in socialist countries, Soviet writers moved much more cautiously in their analysis of the population problems of the developing countries. Although the U.S.S.R. shifted during the mid-1960s to a position of support for programmes of technical assistance in family planning for developing countries (Finkle and Crane, 1976), Soviet analyses of the problem of development consistently maintained that population was not at the root of the troubles facing developing societies and that only a transition to a socialist economic order would solve the problem of underdevelopment.

Nevertheless, by opting for direct action to deal with population problems in their own societies, the Soviets left the door open to a re-analysis of population issues in other societies as well. In this context, the works of several eminent Soviet demographers (Guzevaty, 1970; Urlanis, 1970;) take on special significance. In these works, it was suggested for the first time that solving the problems of the lesser-developed nations might require direct efforts to lower fertility. Such a suggestion obviously contradicted the traditional socialist position and thus required some justification. The rationale given was an interesting one and constituted a first step toward a new socialist theory of population and development. Imperialism, it was argued, had fundamentally transformed the economic and population patterns of many developing societies. As a result, rapid population growth was placing a tremendous strain on their economies. While socialist transformation must, in the long run, hold the key to improvement, in the short term, policies designed to lower population growth might be necessary to correct for the distortions in growth patterns resulting from the impact of imperialism. Unfortunately, no detailed analysis of the population trends in lesser-developed countries was undertaken to demonstrate the effects of imperialism. Nevertheless, these ideas constituted a genuinely new element in socialist thought on population and may yet lead to a new interpretation of the demography of developing areas.

Current Soviet population policies reflect a continuation of the trend toward increased state intervention in population matters. However, there is now a greater effort to provide ideological justification for policies apparently in conflict with the traditional socialist position. The rationale given is quite simple. In contrast to societies organized on market principles, socialist societies are characterized by social planning undertaken by the state. It is natural, then, that such planning should extend to population questions. As phrased in a recent statement: "Social planning should provide for a degree of regulation of demographic processes. Demographic policy is not a series of measures isolated from general programmes of social development. On the contrary, under socialism we regard it as an inalienable part of social policy" (Ryabushkin, 1978:717).

Present policies are designed to increase the rate of growth, but it is clear that statements such as this could be used to justify actions designed to lower growth rates. On this score, the central Asian republics may yet provide an interesting test case. Although the Soviets reject the idea that the rapid rate of growth in these regions is a problem and argue that the rate will decline as development proceeds (Ryabushkin, 1978:719), recent Soviet statements support a regional approach to demographic policy issues, with the evident intent of equalizing growth rates in the Soviet republics (Weber and Goodman, 1981).

*Chinese Views on Population*

The experience of the U.S.S.R. and the Eastern European nations constitutes only half of the story of the development of population theory and policies in socialist societies. The other half concerns the People's Republic of China. Yet in spite of the very different demographic situation and the different historical path of economic and social development, the evolution of population theory in China followed a course strikingly similar to the situation in the Soviet Union. The immediate post-revolutionary years were again marked by strident anti-Malthusian attacks and lavish praise for China's large population and its rapid rate of growth. Mao himself wrote that "a large population in China is a good thing. With a population increase of several fold we still have an adequate solution" (quoted in Wu Ta-k'un, 1979:704).

Behind this image of Marxist orthodoxy, however, a constant struggle was occurring. As Tien (1973) has observed, from the earliest years after the Revolution, significant voices were being raised in favour of population control. While advocates of population control have found themselves in a precarious position at times, in recent years their views have come to predominate. Some doubt still exists as to the efficacy of recent Chinese policy initiatives, but there can be no doubt about the commitment of the present regime to population control. Indeed, current Chinese policies may well represent the most thorough attempt to regulate population patterns ever undertaken by a society (Tien, 1980; Goodstadt, 1982). It is interesting, then, to note the rationale provided for the radical shift in policy which has occurred — a shift which would seem to contradict the views expressed by Mao Zedong. The arguments given are precisely those used by the Soviets. A planned socialist economy demands planned control of population (Chen Muhua, 1979). Socialist society must co-ordinate demographic patterns with the development of the economy as a whole.

The intention of the Chinese is, of course, the opposite of the Soviets. They wish to bring down the rate of population increase, and this draws them more easily into conflict with the traditional socialist position. Recent Chinese statements, though still claiming to begin from socialist principles, argue that rapid growth hinders the performance of the Chinese economy and thus must be controlled. Some analysts have even extended this argument to apply to societies not currently organized along socialist lines (Dai Ling, 1980). In following this approach, they have moved further away from traditional Marxist views than have the Soviets, but what is quite remarkable is the similar path both nations have followed in restructuring socialist population theory.

The approach to population developed by writers in the socialist nations constitutes one of the major lines of contemporary Marxist thought. Before we examine the other major approach, it would be helpful to summarize and evaluate developments in this first group. Socialist writers have been faced with a very different historical situation from that which confronted Marx, Engels, and their early followers. A different demographic situation, combined with the task of administering complex societies, has pushed socialist leaders to look for new ways of understanding and dealing with population questions. In coming to terms with these issues, they have moved a considerable distance from the original Marxist formula. The ideological basis given for these reformulations are two ideas of Marx and Engels: Marx's view that laws of population are historically specific and Engels' contention that communist societies may control the production of people if called upon to do so. Yet in seizing on these points, they ignore the central notion of Marxist theory that population patterns do not develop in a haphazard fashion but are shaped by the structure of society. Each specified mode of production may have its own specific law of population, but, as Marx attempted to demonstrate in the case of capitalism, it is *the mode of production* which determines this law. By contrast, the policy proposals and analyses of writers in the socialist nations do not follow from any theory of how the structure of socialist society yields the population patterns which characterize these societies.

*Neo-Marxist Views on Population*

The influence of Marxist thought extends well beyond the confines of the socialist countries. Examining alternative formulas is difficult, however, because of the great diversity of opinion and situation among those who adopt the Marxist viewpoint. Western European and American Marxists, theorists of underdevelopment, some feminist writers, and a host of others have all drawn upon Marxist theory and addressed themselves to population questions. In addition, most groups in this category have been highly critical of the policies of the avowedly socialist nations. In the section which follows, the discussion will be limited to one particular group of neo-Marxist writers — the students of underdevelopment. It is these writers who have made the greatest efforts to come to terms with problems of population in the developing countries.

Even in this group, the job of nailing down a Marxist view of population is not easy. Again, we find considerable diversity of opinion, but also, as with the early socialist writers, we find few sustained discussions of the topic. These writers are primarily concerned with identifying the sources of underdevelopment and poverty in the developing countries, and, in their view, population is not a significant factor. The problems of these countries stem in large measure from their relationship with developed capitalist economies. The underdeveloped societies are drawn into the capitalist world system, usually as specialized producers of a narrow range of agricultural or mineral products. As a result, they assume a position of dependency within the world economic order — their economies buffeted by fluctuations in the international economy. This position of dependency effectively prevents the kind of broad-based autocentric development which alone can rescue them from their desperate situation (Amin, 1976; Evans, 1979; Frank, 1969).

What role does population play in these circumstances? According to the dependency theorists, the role of scapegoat. Despite the great diversity of demographic conditions in developing societies, supporters of population control uniformly identify overpopulation as a major, if not *the* major, source of their problems (Amin, 1971). But, they argue, population only appears to be a serious problem. Underdevelopment creates a relative surplus population in these countries whether the rate of increase is high or low. Indeed, the destruction of the traditional economy, which results from the introduction of capitalist methods of social and economic organization, often distorts traditional demographic patterns and contributes to the high rates of urbanization, which are often cited as evidence of overpopulation. Moreover, underdevelopment helps to sustain a pattern of rapid population growth by placing individual families in a position where it makes good economic sense to have many children (Amin, 1976:357-358; Mamdani, 1972).

Is there, then, no population problem in the developing societies? Is a high rate of growth beneficial for these countries? No answer to these questions will apply to all countries. Some may well benefit from further growth while others will not. What is clear is that intervention directed at controlling population growth will not solve the massive problems facing these countries, since the population patterns themselves are the product of an existing economic system which fosters underdevelopment. Only change in the social and economic organization of society will produce change in demographic processes. Moreover, this reasoning can be extended to the individual level as well. Family planning programmes will have little success in developing countries so long as individual families see it as in their best interests to have a large number of children.

The approach of the theorists of underdevelopment is, clearly, much more in line with the ideas of Marx and Engels. These writers have taken the original Marxist analysis designed to apply to maturing capitalist economies and applied it to currently developing societies. In doing so, they have added a new dimension by focussing on relations between the developed and underdeveloped societies as well as on the relations between classes. Yet their analysis of population questions

remains much the same. It is the structure of society and the economy which shapes demographic processes, and therefore attempts to manipulate population variables in the absence of economic transformation will come to naught.

### *Summary*

In this paper, we have attempted to identify some important developments in the history of socialist theories of population and to focus in particular on the emergence of two distinct trends in contemporary thought. These trends are represented on the one hand by the work of scholars and policymakers in the socialist countries, and on the other hand, by the writings of neo-Marxist scholars outside the socialist nations. Confronted with the radical economic and demographic changes which have occurred since the time of Marx, both streams of thought have moved some way from early Marxist formulations. In particular, neither group shows the unrestrained enthusiasm for rapid population growth typical of many early Marxists (cf. Clark, 1977; Simon, 1981). However, the scholars outside the socialist bloc have remained far more faithful to the traditional Marxist approach. Moreover, they have attempted to develop explanations for the emergence of the demographic patterns which now characterize the underdeveloped world. Though they have shifted the focus from the relations between classes in capitalist society to the relations between developed and underdeveloped nations, they retain the central Marxist idea that demographic processes are shaped by the economic structure of society, and they oppose interventionist schemes designed to directly manipulate population variables.

By contrast, writers in the socialist countries, faced with attacking difficult economic and political problems in which demographic factors play a key role, have increasingly opted for direct intervention. Arguing that a planned socialist economy demands demographic planning as well, they reject the idea that demographic patterns are determined by the mode of production and argue for the adoption of policies designed to radically alter the population patterns of their countries. To this point, however, their arguments for intervention have not been supported by a theoretical analysis of the sources of demographic growth and change in socialist societies.

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