

F•O•R•U•M

Perspectives on Canadian Population

Stationary population as a *Fata Morgana*

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Être dans le vent...une ambition de feuille morte.
— Gustave Thibon

Introduction

The notion of *Fata Morgana* has generally quite a negative connotation—it refers to a mirage, an optical illusion, and artificial, unreliable, and misleading knowledge. According to this point of view, mirages induce self-deception, and should be dispensed with as quickly as possible.

There is, however, a much more positive connotation attached to an interpretation developed by Albert Hirschman (1967: 32ff). For him, human beings, especially in a world marred by deep complexity and uncertainty, have a tendency to underestimate their creativity and inner strengths in the face of those difficult circumstances. In such predicaments, simplistic utopian visions and mirages (hiding or minimizing the costs and difficulties ahead, and/or exaggerating the potential ease of overcoming them) may helpfully compensate for these infirmities of man's imagination—in much the same way that the beautiful imaginary oasis, seen by members of a caravan deep in the desert, increases their efforts to the point that, in spite of their sufferings, they reach the next real oasis.

Those of the Hirschman persuasion (like me) do not malign these sorts of *êtres de raison* or simplified *chromos* that often play a crucial role in keeping the attention on certain key issues, and imbue the exploratory drive with new energy. That is why one must be grateful to senior scholars, who, no longer feeling the need to be *dans le vent*, dare to work on exploratory essays built on controversial reference points, to help reframe the debates in times when most participants and observers would appear to be at a loss as to the most effective way to proceed.

This sort of bold exploratory work shakes off excessive prudence in order to allow the mind not to be unduly restrained by the barnacles of traditional scholarly rules. The objective is not to build a full-fledged theory or model, but only to provide a *conceptual framework*—a set of relationships that may not be specific enough to lead to testable propositions about the world of events, but that provides the mold out of which specific theories are constructed by adventurous critical thinking (Leibenstein 1976: 17–18).

In this Forum, Anatole Romaniuk (2017) has provided us with one such valuable exploratory essay.

In such a work, it is difficult to be at the same time general, simple, and precise. Romaniuk's *advocacy paper* (his words) has chosen to be general and simple. It aims at nothing less than suggesting a demographic rule—stationary population—as likely to generate optimality in all perspectives—ecological, economic, social cohesion, and national identity. Special attention is paid to Canada in this paper, but the rule is meant to be of universal application in the West. And while the author inserts, in passing, a cautious remark about this rule not being a panacea or a sufficient condition—for there may be other supplementary conditions needed to reach these optima—it is not unfair to say that this rule is meant to do much of the heavy lifting.

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It is quite a daunting endeavour, especially in a relatively short paper. So, even the favourably disposed reader would reasonably expect that Romaniuk's *tour de force* might not be without some lacunae—if only as a result of the author's not having been provided with sufficient space to develop his argument as fully as he might have wished.

In gauging the contribution of the Romaniuk paper, a fair but critical reader should be expected to deal with it fully, recognizing the particularities of the genre, and not only draw attention to the most enlightening and useful components of the paper, but also taking notice of these lacunae, separating those strictly due to the condensed and necessarily incomplete nature of any such short paper, on the one hand, from those ascribable to the author's decision to under-emphasise other fundamentally determining factors, on the other.

The lay of the land in three movements

Fortissimo

In the front end of the paper, Romaniuk presents a clinical synthetic sketch of a broad canvas of forces that needs to be taken into account in any reasonable attempt to assess the recent turn toward mass indiscriminate immigration, over the last twenty-five years—in Canada particularly—but also in other countries of the Western world. He draws from recent studies (including his own) a clear picture of the process unfolding in Canada:

- declining fertility;
- net immigration making up some 60% of population growth between 1996 and 2011 in Canada;
- a deliberate mass immigration policy, falsely purported by government officials to generate economic progress and compensate for the ageing of the population, but failing at both tasks;
- a displacement of the old Canadian stock by newcomers that is in the process of dramatically changing the cultural makeup of the country;
- the ideology of *diversity* elevated by federal public officials and a significant segment of the intelligentsia and the media to the status of an absolute unifying virtue, and used by the Canadian government to underpin the propaganda of the multiculturalism ideology, claiming that it would organically generate a miracle of unity from diversity.

Many of these points are well established in the literature, but assembling them in one place gives the whole a greater *force de frappe*. Many stakeholders are in denial about the whole dynamic that these factors create. Romaniuk's counter-attack is therefore value-adding in exposing some of the flawed assumptions of those proposing what he calls a *populationist agenda*.

Glissando

The next section in Romaniuk's paper is a quick windshield survey of “a number of things that are in need of reconsideration in order to find a response to the population conundrum.”

These “things” are underlined as part of a soft *remise en question* of the *populationist agenda* by setting its discussion within a loose conceptual framework that brings into focus important forces at work in the context.

These *observations* (for lack of a better word) are a mix of bare facts, hunches developed from experience or conventional wisdom, some inferences from the general discussion at the front end of the paper, and some normative suggestions. They are brought to the attention of the reader in a Van Goghian manner to flesh out a more comprehensive appreciation of the socio-demographic context:

- Immigration is not a solution to all our socio-economic problems, but can be a part of it.
- More attention needs to be paid to matters of *quality of life* (harmony, cohesion, security).
- Immigration may not be as important to economic growth as presumed.
- More equal distribution of wealth would reduce migration.
- We should be mindful of the ecological health of the planet (limits to population growth).
- Motherhood should be regarded as a public good, and more appropriately rewarded.

- Family law needs a recast.
- Given the fact that a number of women choose not to have children, three babies each for the rest of the country's women would be optimal to ensure a stationary population.

All these points are relevant to the central theme of the debate—which is *the impact of mass indiscriminate immigration*—and they constitute avenues both for enriching the perspectives on the debate, and for a potential rethinking of the public sector interventions that might be called for. Romaniuk does not present these various elements as part of a precise program, nor is he always declarative about the exact type of interventions he would favour. The impression left with the reader is that modifying a multiplicity of arrangements would be called for, and that these many re-arrangements would need to be intelligently coordinated and integrated into a *visionary population policy*. In fact, the need for a *vision* is squarely put forward as mandatory, but details of such a vision are not spelled out. As a result, at the end of this section on the broadening of perspectives, we are left somewhat unequipped to develop our own brand of vision, and to respond to the question of what we should do next? Indeed, we are more likely to be overwhelmed by the immensity of the ill-defined task we are confronted with.

Moderato

The last portion of the paper brings it to a conclusion in a telescopic way by stating:

Given this paper's conclusion that stationary population policies are *optimal* for maintaining national identity, social cohesion, and material well-being, the question remains whether the robust pro-family policies to achieve childbearing at the generational replacement level are doable. (my emphasis)

This is at the same time an overstatement, for the foundations presented for Romaniuk's optimality theorem are quite elliptic—and somewhat short on the implementation front—for it provides little practical guidance as to what might make this operationalization phase doable.

In closing the paper, Romaniuk vibrantly expresses his optimism about the possibility of his fundamental and revolutionary proposal materializing. Yet after a final excursus into the worlds of Kondratieff and Spengler, this vibrant optimism appears to falter *un tant soi peu*, for he concludes:

Let us hope, though, that against all the odds, the implementation of stationary population policies offers a prospect of stabilizing and, perhaps, of reversing it.

Hope is still there, but it appears somewhat thin. Indeed, by the end of the penultimate paragraph of the paper, Anatole Romaniuk seems ready to settle for a rather important but very modest small step:

Western governments should, at the very least, moderate the impulses for ever greater immigration, and take a more critical view of diversity as a social construct in nationhood building.

Lacunae

As mentioned earlier, this sort of short exploratory paper, as a genre, is bound to be at times more suggestive than comprehensive, and it allows the author more licence than usual for ignoring or underplaying some aspects of the problem that other observers might regard as essential pieces of the puzzle. This section suggests some flats and sharps that might provoke Romaniuk (in a possible sequel to the present paper) into reconsidering some avenues that he is quite familiar with, but to which he has chosen to give less attention here.

Some flats

It must be said that so little of substance is adduced about social cohesion and national identity—matters of great importance, indeed—that it must be underlined as a lacuna that considerably weakens the thrust of the paper, and that by itself would appear to call for a sequel to this paper.

Even when the impact of the mass immigration policy on the cultural make-up of the country is referred to—for example, when writing about the Dion et al. (1995) paper—the author fails to present anything like an explication of the consequences that may be derived from the results of said paper. This would appear to follow from the limited attention given to social cohesion and national identity.

It is difficult to understand why the author has paid so little attention to the whole richly-federal-government-financed brain-washing exercise by the diversity/multiculturalism clan, and in particular to its erasure of English Canadian culture by the likes of Charles Taylor (Duchesne 2016). This erasure is probably the main source of the *lack of effective resistance* to these toxic new policies. Significant segments of the politicians, the federal bureaucracy, academia, and the media have swallowed this imposture and played a toxic role in *disinforming* the citizens and in preventing a critical debate about the policies in good currency (Paquet 2012, 2017).

Romaniuk has also chosen not to probe further the *electoral gauntlet* in which the Canadian federal government has entrapped itself, which has allowed the proportion of the Canadian population born outside the country to grow unduly rapidly, to become one out of five—and much higher in large cities like Toronto and Vancouver—thereby taxing the absorptive capacity of the country. This situation has left Canadian federal governments of all stripes at risk of paying a high price at the polls if they were to give any hint of tightening the immigration policy. This, in turn, has paralyzed government action in the face of the current predicament, and put Canada in a position where it is drifting toward an irreversible vortex, since an ill-informed citizenry is unlikely to force the Canadian government to take any corrective action soon.

Some sharps

- Some attention should perhaps have been focused in Romaniuk's paper on the *absorptive capacity philosophy* that was in good currency in Canada until the last few decades. This might take some of the lustre off the stationary population solution by relaxing it, but it would appear to be *incontournable* in such a paper, since this softer and more flexible approach might appear immensely easier to sell and implement than the more radical solution.
- More might also have been usefully said about *integration*, since more effective integration would make a great difference in gauging the impact of mass indiscriminate immigration. If many more newcomers could be expected to integrate (not to assimilate) with the Canadian old stock—i.e., if they could be expected not to play such havoc with the Canadian cultural make-up—this might modify the notion of what is a workable absorptive capacity.
- Romaniuk should not have avoided the question of screening newcomers. Canada already does it, but the whole question of the *conditions of admission* for new immigrants is shunned, for fear of falling into the trap of a Charter of Values à la the Parti Québécois (Paquet 2012: ch. 4). This caution has made the whole question a taboo topic, when it is clearly in the back of the minds of all Canadians, old and new.
- Even though Romaniuk makes a case for soft demography, and is intellectually committed to it, there is still a *demometric twist* in the discipline of demography that parallels quantophobia in the social sciences in general (Paquet 2014: ch. 3). These modes have generated an immense caution when it comes to probing the most qualitative and complex dimensions of culture. As a result, the paper avoids tackling head-on the bizarre proposition propounded by Charles Taylor et al.—and senselessly repeated by the likes of Justin Trudeau—that Canada has no culture of its own (Duchesne 2016; Paquet 2017). According to this insanity, Quebecers have a culture, Aborigines have a culture, and immigrants have a culture—and therefore cultural rights—while Canadians (at least those in the rest of Canada) do not. This bizarre proposition underpins the very notion that mass indiscriminate immigration *cannot*, by definition, erode social cohesion or Canadian culture, because such a thing as Canadian culture does not exist. A culturally sensitive and refined scholar like Professor Romaniuk cannot be expected to ignore this ignoble elephant in the room.

Conclusion

Romaniuk has succeeded in bringing forth, in a high-quality scholarly journal, an intelligent discussion of what has been almost a taboo topic in Canada. This is quite an accomplishment. However, as my flats and sharps underlined, the occlusion of certain crucial forces at work, and the proclivity to overprotect the stationary population approach as *primus inter pares* in the list of important solutions, may have weakened the *force de frappe* of the paper. Four points may be useful in closing.

First, the idea of hoping to resolve such a complex problem as immigration policy by a simple radical rule like stationary population may be a good way to start a most necessary conversation about Canada's immigration policy, but it is unlikely that the final answer that will eventually emerge from intelligent conversations will be that simple. As Romaniuk himself mentions, many additional re-arrangements will be necessary, and it is most likely that they will not materialize by direct state action but through oblique interventions and nudging (Kay 2011; Thaler and Sunstein 2008).

Second, this sort of bias for simplicity—however minor and however unwittingly it may emerge—is not a danger for Romaniuk, who is intent on launching a serious conversation leading to much social learning. He knows from experience that genuine conversations and fruitful exchanges triggered by pioneers like himself can often lead to an outcome that almost completely leaves out the proposal that has served as the point of origin of the discussion. What survives is the sum of the criticisms that it has elicited—what Gaston Bachelard calls *le surebjet* (Bachelard 1949: 138ff). This is not a failure of the originator, but a sign of the heuristic fruitfulness of the conversation he has initiated. Therefore, it would be a pity to fetishize the original proposal and thereby block social learning.

Third, the tendency to unduly de-emphasize the most sensitive psycho-social-cultural issues in the way that exploratory papers, like the one by Romaniuk, tend to do may prove extraordinarily costly. Most often, meaningful issues are contentious, paradoxical, difficult to disentangle, and a privileged terrain for ideological frictions. But they are also the loci where the resolution of the problems must and should be debated. Intellectual gump-tion should prevail.

Finally, such exploratory open-ended inquiries into tricky policy problems (Paquet 2013) should be conducted neither in accordance with the diktats of hyper-politeness nor with the blinders of hyper-positivism. Because, as Adam Kahane suggests: “Politeness is a way of not talking. When we are being polite, we say what we think we should say... Politeness maintains status quo”. (2007: 56). This is not the sort of conversation that Anatole Romaniuk wants to initiate.

Moreover, as the conversation unfolds, one should be particularly diligent in not blocking out a whole range of usable information emerging from intuition, sensitivity, imagination, or even unreliable folk knowledge. All these sources of imperfect knowledge and intuition pumps cannot be ignored (Dennett 2013). Fritz Schumacher (1978) conveys this point most effectively in his story about the two types of cartographers: the Type I cartographer, who would not agree to record a piece of information on the map unless it has been trebly cross-checked, and the Type II cartographer, who, in case of doubt in the face of unverified information, would be led to record the information on the map prominently. In our world of continuous surprises, scholars proposing to conduct an inquiry that goes well beyond the short run need to adopt a Type II cartographer frame of mind: anything might serve along the way. Explorers, as they board their canoe to discover what there is down the river (or as they join a conversation of discovery) might find it useful that their documents factor in the hearsay of the natives about the existence of a 200-metre waterfall, maybe, “way down there” (or its conversational equivalent in terms of pitfalls). I hope that an adventurous scholar like Anatole Romaniuk would concur.

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