Whither demography? Strengths and Weaknesses of the Discipline over Fifty Years of Change

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Whither demography? Strengths and Weaknesses of the Discipline over Fifty Years of Change

Demography was launched in the 1930s, developed institutionally in the United States and France after 1945, and rapidly extended to many other countries. As a scientific discipline, it is among the most recent, though it now has a history to recount. In over half a century, the discipline has developed, both in terms of its themes and instruments of research and in its teaching, following different pathways and advancing at different speeds from continent to continent and country to country. What stage has the science of demography reached today? What is its place in social sciences research and teaching? Has it reached a turning point? What of its scientific visibility and its social and political utility? What of its future? Are we moving towards one or several forms of demography?

These general questions, both wide-ranging and complex, will be addressed as I examine what I consider to be the discipline’s assets and strengths, its weaknesses and constraints (variable from one region to another) and a certain number of short- and medium-term risks and imperatives. I will end with a few suggestions. These questions are not new ones, or indeed specific to our own discipline, but they are worthy of particular attention at this time.

The discussion is based on the findings of recent seminars and publications devoted to the history, current situation and future of demography, analysis of the content of major conferences, the findings of working groups (such as the IUSSP group on teaching from 1997 to 2002), and recent major surveys of

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(1) Often held to celebrate emeritus professors (such as the 2002 Quetelet Chair of the Institute of Demography of the Catholic University of Louvain, “Entre nature et culture : quelle(s) démographie(s) ?”, Loriaux and Vilquin (eds.), 2006), the anniversaries of journals (Demography’s 30th in 1993, Population Studies’ 40th in 1996) or institutions (INED’s 50th in 1995, with the publication in 1997 of Les contours de la démographie au seuil du xxie siècle, Editions de l’INED, 435 p.).
demographers\textsuperscript{(2)} and research institutions around the world\textsuperscript{(3)}. It includes my own personal experience as a professor in a European university institute of demography, and as a researcher working mainly on population questions in countries of the South. The point of view will therefore be neither comprehensive nor totally unbiased.

### I. Demography is no longer a slow-flowing river: a rapid historical overview

Barely thirty or forty years ago, demography was a clearly delimited discipline, precisely defined in terms of its topics and methodology. Its essential objects were structures by age, sex and marital status, fertility, mortality and internal migration; its basic tools were standard demographic analysis and elementary statistics; most of its data came from administrative information systems (civil records, censuses, the occasional register)\textsuperscript{(4)}. We measured phenomena and growth rates, described levels and trends, we projected (as best we could), and worked mainly at aggregate level. This can be seen in many of the definitions of demography that were given in those days. Here are just a few examples\textsuperscript{(5)}.

Hauser and Duncan (1959): “Demography is the study of the size, territorial distribution, and composition of population, changes therein, and the components of such changes.”

Kirk (1949): “Demography is the quantitative study of human populations. Its central concerns are the measurement and discovery of uniformities in the basic processes of human birth, death, population movement and population growth.”

Bogue (1969): “Demography is the empirical, statistical and mathematical study of human populations.”

United Nations Multilingual Demographic Dictionary (1958): “Demography is the scientific study of human populations primarily with respect to their size, their structure and their development; it takes into account the quantitative aspects of their general characteristics.”

During the 1970s and 1980s, demography rapidly became more international as teaching and research centres were created on every continent and new schools of thought emerged\textsuperscript{(6)}. National and international funding increased,

\textsuperscript{(2)} Particularly the first Internet survey in 2000 of demographers worldwide (637 respondents), concerning their training and careers, their vision of demography, research, etc. The results were published in 2004 (Démographie 2000. Une enquête internationale par Internet auprès des démographes, Academia/Brulvant, Louvain-la-Neuve, 368 p.).

\textsuperscript{(3)} See in particular the CICRED 2003 paper, Panorama institutionnel et scientifique de la recherche démographique dans le monde, presenting the activities of 499 centres world-wide.

\textsuperscript{(4)} Although the first major national surveys in countries of the North and South were carried out in the 1950s and 1960s.

\textsuperscript{(5)} Others may be found in Caldwell (1996) and Preston (1993).

\textsuperscript{(6)} At that point, mainly American, English and French.
in both North and South, with a clear priority given to fertility. Surveys became the preferred data collection method almost everywhere, especially in developing countries\(^{(7)}\). At the same time, computer technology developed rapidly and considerable progress was made in analysis (biographical approaches, models, indirect methods, etc.). This was also a time of debate and revision of theories. Alongside a formal demography (known variously as analytical, statistical or mathematical) there developed a more multi-disciplinary social demography\(^{(8)}\), focusing more on the social, economic, political and cultural causes and consequences of change, aiming, in other words, to understand and explain (we will return to this point below). Nevertheless, during that period (1970-1985) there was no major change in the clearly distinct research objects that were the standard components of population dynamics.

Towards the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s, demographers’ scope and areas of interest became more diversified under the pressure of facts (much of the world was faced with crises and their consequences), social and political demand (national or international) and sometimes funding requirements for the institutions created. With varying degrees of inertia, demography began to venture out of its own territory and open up to the major issues of society, moving into fields that had once belonged to other disciplines: development (population and development), poverty (demography and poverty), gender (gender and population), environment (population and environment), health and reproduction, sexuality, etc. – not to mention ageing and AIDS. This brought about a new degree of specialization among demographers. It was also a period of methodological change (Courgeau 1997): for example, from focusing on aggregate analysis (1950s and 1960s), then individual analysis (1970s and 1980s), demography moved into multi-level analysis, in step with the other social sciences.

At the start of the twenty-first century, demography is still a long river, but a much broader, more tumultuous and many-branched one. The discipline is challenged from within, and in competition with the outside world; some even see it as under threat. What are its assets and achievements? What are its weaknesses and constraints? I shall only consider fairly general observations or questions that arise from recent research or my own questioning. Some of my conclusions need to be qualified at local level because, perhaps more so than in other disciplines, the history, institutional status and place of demography vary enormously from one part of the world to another, and even from one country to another, including within Europe\(^{(9)}\).

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\(^{(7)}\) Including the two major international programmes: the World Fertility Survey (1975-82, in 62 countries) and the Demographic and Health Surveys since 1985 (around 210 surveys in 74 Southern countries to date).

\(^{(8)}\) Sometimes called “population studies” in English.

\(^{(9)}\) See, for example, the INED 50th anniversary publication (edited by J.C. Chasteland and L. Roussel, 1997), which compares the experience of seven countries since 1945 (Canada, France, Hungary, Netherlands, United Kingdom, United States and USSR).
II. Achievements and assets of demography

Demography is an independent social science, admired and sometimes feared; it has opened up to new questions, has undergone methodological change, and has gradually turned towards explanation. It also trains people to become demographers. Let us examine these various points.

A social science

Called a “wild frontier science” (science sauvage) by Alfred Sauvy in 1945, and more recently a “hostage science” (science otage) by Michel Loriaux (1996), demography has certainly become a science in the true sense of the word, with its body of research objects, methods and paradigms (I will return to this below). This is probably one of the points on which there is most agreement, even if the word “science” does not always appear in the definitions (often replaced by “discipline”). The term “demographic science” is sometimes used, or more broadly, that of “population science”\(^\text{(10)}\). Demography is not, or is no longer, simply a technique for computing rates.

Its objects of study (the behaviour of human populations from individual to society level) put demography among the social sciences, even if statistics, biology and public health are integral components of the discipline, even if demographers or demography practitioners come from varied academic backgrounds\(^\text{(11)}\). In most universities in the world, demography is attached to faculties of economics, political or social sciences. But this does not mean that within the official typologies of social sciences specific to each country it is always recognized as a separate discipline, as is the case for sociology, anthropology or political science.

A largely independent discipline

Demography soon acquired a specific organization for its scientific production and teaching, as a reflection of its status as a science. Virtually from the outset\(^\text{(12)}\), it spawned its own international association (IUSSP in 1928) and scholarly journals (Population Index in 1933, Genus in 1934, Population in 1945, Population Studies in 1947\(^\text{(13)}\)). Illustrating both the discipline’s vitality and the diverse range of problems across the world, the 1970s and 1980s saw

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\(\text{(10)}\) For example, in 1992, the Catholic University of Louvain set up a department of population and development sciences comprising an institute of demography and an institute of development studies.

\(\text{(11)}\) Apart from a few countries where demography is a separate graduate degree (Algeria, D.R. Congo, etc.) or is taught in a specific scientific department (such as statistics in Morocco until 2003 and Italy, and often sociology in the United States).

\(\text{(12)}\) For a much more detailed history, see Maffioli (2006b).

\(\text{(13)}\) Followed by other journals such as Demography in 1964, Demography India in 1973, Population and Development Review in 1974, etc.
a blossoming of associations, congresses and reviews\textsuperscript{(14)} at both regional\textsuperscript{(15)} and national levels.

University teaching developed in North America and Europe in the 1950s and above all the 1960s, in varied forms from one country to another, with demography incorporated in sociology curricula (United States) or taught as specialized graduate courses (France, Belgium, Canada, etc.). In the South, independent programmes were quickly set up, notably under the impetus of the United Nations Population Division and UNFPA\textsuperscript{(16)}. At present, most countries in Asia and Latin America offer master’s degrees in formal demography or population studies, and, increasingly, PhD courses likewise.

This scientific, institutional and sometimes financial independence, achieved over the years without too much difficulty, has many advantages, but also, as we shall see, disadvantages.

**Rigorous methodology**

If we take the habitual (and simplistic) dichotomy between “hard” and “soft” sciences, demography is undeniably the hardest of the social sciences, concerned essentially with quantification and applying strict methodological standards for both data collection and analysis. It is an inductive science, sometimes described as formal or empirical, that does not burden itself with discourse, uncertainty or rash interpretation. As Preston (1993, p.594) puts it:

“In part because of their closeness to data production, demographers are the most inductive of social scientists, focused to a greater extent than other social scientists on careful measurement and cautious interpretation.”

Similarly, Caldwell (1996, p. 333) wrote:

“Demography will remain a distinct discipline because of its approach: its demand that conclusions be in keeping with observable and testable data in the real world, that these data be used as shrewdly as possibly to elicit their real meanings, and that the study should be representative of sizeable or significant and definable populations.”

Among the other social sciences and humanities, the perception of demography varies from one discipline to another, or even, within a discipline, from one researcher to another. Often misunderstood (see below), genuinely rigorous, cautious in its interpretations, demography is admired by some while inspiring fear and scepticism in others.

\textsuperscript{(14)} CICRED’s *Revue des revues démographiques* in 2003 lists nearly 75 journals in the world wholly or partly devoted to demography.

\textsuperscript{(15)} For example, the creation in 1983 of the EAPS (European Association for Population Studies) with its own journal (*European Journal of Population*) and congresses, and in 1984 UAPS (Union for African Population Studies) with *African Population Studies*.

Recent new research themes

Likewise, there is no doubt that, like all scientific disciplines, demography is evolving. Some would say it is adapting, others would say it as progressing. It has opened up its objects and its lines of research (as mentioned above), and its methods of data collection and analysis. Demography and demographers today are no longer what they used to be.

The *Démographie 2000* survey (Chasteland et al., 2004) analyses the reasons for these changes as stated by “demographers” themselves. The development of micro-longitudinal data and of computer technologies are by far the most frequently mentioned, followed by the use of theories and techniques from other disciplines, and progress in demographic analysis. Ultimately, the “progress” of demography is due more to external than internal factors. Regarding the fields of interest in 2000, fertility still ranks first (36% of responses), clearly ahead of mortality-morbidity, nuptiality and the family, internal and international migration. Loriaux (2004, p. 161) comments:

“In short, we may say that over time there has been both quantitative and qualitative change in the themes addressed by demographers, but that these changes are limited and do not involve a revolution or upheaval in the content of the discipline, but rather an adaptation to changes in the environmental context.”

Among the social phenomena reported by the researchers as having influenced their research work, we find, unsurprisingly, population ageing, rapid growth in the South, the greater role of women, the development of international migration, low fertility in the North and AIDS. As yet, the impact on research of environmental issues, unemployment, new forms of poverty and globalization has been limited.

A broader range of quantitative tools

Traditional demographic analysis remains a key tool in the demographer’s kit: it marries well with standard information systems and can be used to measure population dynamics at aggregate level. Its quest for rigour is legitimate; the Lexis diagram is still useful and often essential. And for thirty years it sealed the reputation of the “French school of demography”. But demography is no longer only a technique for research into phenomena in the absence of competing risk. It has extended its field of investigation from the macro-period to the micro-longitudinal, and placed greater emphasis on gaining new insight (see next section) by devising or using more complex information systems.

As a result, it now uses many statistical tools other than simple demographic analysis, often borrowed from outside (17) and adapted to its needs, with no

(17) Tools such as log-linear and multi-level models were used in sociology, psychology and economics before they were adopted by demographers.
great creativity of its own, in my opinion\(^{(18)}\). In this respect it is far from being fully independent.

This change in the “techniques of demography”\(^{(19)}\) has been clearly apparent in the last fifteen years in both publications and teaching. Many demography curricula have been recently revised and now often include more hours of statistics or even new specific courses on multivariate analysis, multi-level analysis and event history analysis. Is demography becoming (once more) a purely quantitative and statistical science?

**Growing concern for how and why**

Although long considered to be a science of measurement, a purely descriptive discipline neither able nor willing to provide explanations, demography now increasingly seeks to understand individual and collective behaviour. This recent change in perspective is a major one. The individual, for example, is no longer seen as a simple trajectory made up of distinct demographic events, each analysed separately, but as a complex life-course comprising various interconnected types of event (demographic, occupational, residential, etc.), a life of stages and periods with variable causalities\(^{(20)}\). From “explaining” the demographic by the demographic, we have moved on to a multi-factorial approach giving full place to the family, to the social circle and networks, to social, economic and cultural factors. We are still a long way from an explanatory science (see below) but real progress has been achieved.

**A profession**

“Demographer” is now a profession, rather as demography is a science. It is that of a researcher or professional whose specific or main activity consists of teaching or addressing population questions, with the apposite technical and theoretical skills (taught or acquired). This is a wide definition, without restrictive criteria (such as specific qualifications) because demographers come from a wide, and widening, range of academic backgrounds\(^{(21)}\).

“Specialists in population questions” recognise themselves as a profession\(^{(22)}\), and increasing numbers of academic and research bodies include the term in their classifications\(^{(23)}\). But, like demography itself, the profession is often

\(^{(18)}\) A rather radical personal opinion, shared by Alain Blum in his examination of the relations between statistics and demography (Blum 1997, pp.266-270).

\(^{(19)}\) Or rather, perhaps, statistical techniques applied to demography.

\(^{(20)}\) This is the philosophy behind the numerous longitudinal event history surveys conducted in recent years.

\(^{(21)}\) Although two-thirds of the respondents in the *Démographie* 2000 survey did have a demography degree. Then came sociology, statistics, economics, geography and history.

\(^{(22)}\) For example, in the 2000 survey, 67% of respondents defined themselves as “demographers”.

\(^{(23)}\) However, there is a long way to go: demography (and demographers) are often classed under sociology (France, Belgium, etc.), statistics, or even wider categories (as in Italy). In many countries, “demographer” is still not listed in the official socio-occupational nomenclature.
unfamiliar to the general public and the media, or its role misunderstood. Overall, the profession is growing in numbers (although I cannot say how fast), becoming more youthful, and more feminized in the younger generations\(^{(24)}\).

We now turn to less positive aspects, less certain, and more controversial in nature.

### III. Demography’s weaknesses and constraints

Demography certainly has its assets and strengths, but it also suffers from constraints and weaknesses that vary in nature and intensity from one region or country to another. I will examine only those I see as most important, most universal, those that may pose a “threat” to the discipline in the short or medium term.

**Relative isolation among the social sciences**

Often independent in institutional or academic terms, with its own specific objects and methods, and still insufficiently concerned with understanding social change\(^{(25)}\), demography tends to be intellectually isolated among the social sciences. Some would even say that it has retreated behind its walls. There is admittedly a growing degree of interdisciplinarity, but this is still not the prime characteristic of demographers; their dialogue with other sciences can be difficult. In Roussel’s opinion (2004, p. 239):

“...form the identity of demography comes from a sort of retrenchment syndrome. Faced with the need to define borders with other scientific fields, demographers prefer to hide behind a Maginot line to minimize the risk of interdisciplinary contamination.”

This isolation can be found too in teaching, where curricula are specific and specialized, with no great interdisciplinary opening to other social sciences.

**A “small” discipline**

In most countries, demography has developed and operates in centres or university teams that are small or even tiny\(^{(26)}\), with fewer researchers and

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\(^{(24)}\) For example, 54% of PAA members were women in 2004, but in many other associations men are still clearly in the majority (63% in the IUSSP in 2004, 66% in AIDELF). However, within the IUSSP, the proportion of women is rising: from 31% in 1999 to 35% in 2003 and 37% in 2005 (among student members it was 54% at the latter date). This feminization of research was pointed up by Teachman et al. in their analysis of the contents of the journal *Demography* from 1964 to 1992.

\(^{(25)}\) With some variations between regions and countries.

\(^{(26)}\) According to the CICRED database (2003, p.30), half the centres listed have fewer than 6 researchers, and only 20% have 12 or more. There are, of course, some major exceptions, such as INED (Paris), NIDI (The Hague) and the Max Planck Institute (Rostock).
students\(^{(27)}\) than other social sciences, and consequently fewer resources and less room for manoeuvre. Even in the United States, as Preston (1993, p. 595) says:

> “Demography is a small discipline lacking security in academic bureaucracies and always in need of a *raison d'être*.”

Of course, numbers are not everything, but they can help in negotiating research or student places or in raising funds. At a time of budget “streamlining” and restriction, as is the case today, “small” entities are vulnerable, and demography is indeed under threat in some places. Networking and the creation of international doctoral schools, as is now the fashion in Europe, does not resolve all the problems.

**Demography’s fragmentation**

Relatively isolated and small, demography is also gradually becoming fragmented, compartmentalized from inside. This is not new, nor limited to our discipline\(^{(28)}\), but in my opinion it is particularly acute and not without danger. In their recent report on thirty years of demography research, Poirier and Piché (1999) make a clear distinction between various types of compartmentalization: between objects of research, levels of analysis, explanatory factors, critical theoretical currents and demographic production centres. Let us examine the first.

From analytical demography, controlled mainly at the start by traditional demographic analysis\(^{(29)}\), largely unconcerned with comprehension or explanation, we have moved on to a number of demographic “sub-disciplines”, a breakdown of demography into separate fields or issues, and greater specialization. Each major field (fertility, mortality, migration, etc.) or issue (family, education, health, ageing, etc.) now has its own specialists, its own tools (for data collection and analysis), and explanatory paradigms. The process is continuing even within individual fields or topics\(^{(30)}\) with, in addition, a gulf between North and South.

This fragmentation is perhaps necessary, or may well be inherent to progress in scientific knowledge, but it is not free of risk: it causes a fragmentation of knowledge, favours the analytical approach over the systemic, and neglects the interactions and complexity that are part of any social system, in terms of both measurement and explanation. A number of recent approaches\(^{(31)}\) are opening up new perspectives, but this is far from enough.

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\(^{(27)}\) This naturally varies by type and level of course, but rarely exceeds thirty.

\(^{(28)}\) Edgar Morin long ago deplored this problem in all sciences.

\(^{(29)}\) At least in the French-speaking world.

\(^{(30)}\) An example of a field might be mortality, divided into child mortality, adult mortality, and now oldest-old mortality, with some specialists focusing on the North and others on the South.

\(^{(31)}\) Such as the life-event history approach already mentioned.
Insufficient progress in explanation

For a science to be complete, or a discipline to deserve the status of a science, it must not only measure but also understand (how) and explain (why)\(^{(32)}\). Demography has made definite progress in the last twenty years or so: it is opening up, or attempting to open up, to the explanation of the social phenomena it already quantifies so well. But this is happening slowly and cautiously, without any clear priority\(^{(33)}\). Overall, the image of demography is that of a science which is good at measuring, but poor or unreliable at explaining (de Bruyn, 1999; Burch, 1999; Tabutin, 1999). Progress in explanation and theorization is real for fertility, but much less so for mortality and migration.

The debate on the place of explanatory or causal research in demography is not a new one; it is more or less recurrent\(^{(34)}\). Some observers see demography as being restricted to the analytical, which was originally its strength, but is now a serious handicap (Loriaux 1996). Others argue that “demography does not, in general, deserve to be qualified as theoretically weak” (Poirier and Piché 1999, p.42), but do recognize that explanatory research has faced many obstacles, particularly due to the fragmentation of the discipline. Let us merely point out that multivariate statistical analysis is not sufficient for explanation; it is only a preliminary stage.

In fact, there is still the risk that demography will remain “a technique rather than a science” (Livi-Bacci, 1984), leaving basic explanation to others (migration to economists and geographers, mortality to health sciences, fertility to sociologists and anthropologists). Demography is short on theoretical and ideological debate.

Too discreet a science?

Despite a certain progress and diversity across the world, demography is generally poorly understood (misunderstood?) both by its fellow disciplines and the world of politics and the media. It is often lacking in public visibility at every level (central government, regions, local authorities and businesses\(^{(35)}\)), and suffers from insufficient dissemination and awareness of its research\(^{(36)}\). Demography has not yet fully emerged from its ivory tower, a position which offers freedom to think but also creates a risk of social and political irrelevance.

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\(^{(32)}\) Consequently, a possible definition of demography would be: “the social science whose object is the descriptive and explanatory study of the structures and dynamics of spatially or culturally determined human populations”.

\(^{(33)}\) One need only note how few sessions at recent major congresses have been specifically devoted to theories or explanation. Or again the little space given to these topics in many study curricula.

\(^{(34)}\) “Is theory for demographers?” (Vance 1952); “Why demographers need theory” (Wunsch 1995).

\(^{(35)}\) Although a form of applied demography, known as business demography, is now developing, notably in the United States.

\(^{(36)}\) Fortunately there are some fine exceptions to the rule, such as the Population and Societies journal in France, or the exhibition on the world population held in Paris in 2005.
This is probably due to the very nature of the discipline: demography is a science more of knowledge than of action. It does provide valuable information to support decision-making processes, but it covers long-term trends rather than topical events, requires complex information systems and relatively long response times, and its diagnoses are cautious. In this respect it has more to do with fundamental research than applied research. Some observers criticize its insufficient (or tardy) engagement with the great contemporary challenges facing the world and its societies (poverty, environment, globalization, etc.), its lack of involvement in public debate, its absence of political commitment\(^{(37)}\). Loriaux (1996) goes so far as to call it a “sanitized discipline”.

IV. Potential risks

I will examine only those that are currently most debated, central to the future of demography, and related to our above remarks: compartmentalization, excessive quantification, explanation left to others, and fragile position within universities.

Compartmentalization

Demography still has, in my opinion, a strong identity, based on objects and tools that are recognized as useful and effective. But some observers are concerned by the processes of specialization that are currently at work in both research and teaching\(^{(38)}\). An extreme scenario might be a “disintegration” of demography into disparate branches that are specific to a particular sector (reproduction, migration, ageing, etc.), discipline (health, economic demography, demographic anthropology, etc.) or region. This may be seen as the positive effect of greater interdisciplinary interaction, as the advance of demography into other fields, or conversely as the risk of a loss of identity, or again as a retreat from the prime object of demography: the study of complete demographic systems in their spatial and temporal diversity. The analytical and fragmented approach to the Object would thus be strengthened.

Towards “statistical extremism”?

Like other disciplines focusing on individual behaviour, demography was destined to move beyond traditional statistical and demographic analysis. Taking on board the most recent trends in statistical analysis was key to progress in this respect. But the danger, in research and teaching, is to slip into a sort of statistical extremism (almost an intellectual terrorism): you can’t be a demographer or do demography without using (or obtaining) the most

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\(^{(37)}\) In the 2000 survey, one-third of respondents stated that they “wanted to take part in political debate”, but more as individuals than as demographers.

\(^{(38)}\) Growing numbers of research centres and teaching programmes are specializing in targeted themes.
sophisticated, “state-of-the-art” toolkit (39). Already perceived as (too?) quantitative, the discipline would become even less comprehensible, forfeiting the opportunity to develop a more open, social or qualitative form of demography.

**Leaving explanation to others?**

The debate among demographers on the place of explanatory research is now open. For one side, demography is progressing, opening up to other disciplines, increasingly concerned with theorization and the use of more advanced data and tools. The other side (including me) sees demography as marking time (40) and still just as hesitant when it comes to understanding and ex-plaining. And when fundamental advances are made, it is often by outsiders (sociologists, historians, anthropologists, economists, etc.). In other words, demography faces “competition” on its own ground. If it cannot explain better using its own resources, it runs the risk of gradually leaving a key feature of all science – insight – in the hands of others, and thereby losing its credibility.

**Is university demography losing steam?**

Throughout the world, universities are the main venue for demographic research and teaching, which is either institutionally independent or incorporated with another discipline (41). The situation naturally varies from one country to another, but demography teaching is often made vulnerable or even threatened for various reasons: the small size of the teaching centres (42), the marginal status of demography with respect to other disciplines (43), fierce competition with similar courses if funding and posts are pared down, a strongly quantitativist image, and poor visibility in career terms. In many places, the future of university demography is increasingly uncertain, including in Europe where major reforms are under way (44). The risks, already upon us, are the disappearance of established courses, fewer students in this field and, ultimately, a shortage of competent young demographers for both fundamental and applied research.

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(39) This process can be seen at work in the content of major journals and recent teaching programmes.

(40) Rather as is happening in other social sciences.

(41) According to the CICRED inventory (2004) there are 329 university centres in the world. This includes regional training centres in developing countries, usually funded by international organizations and attached to universities.

(42) Particularly those structures that are institutionally independent.

(43) It is often only an adjunct to courses in other subjects.

(44) What will be the place of demography in the new European 3-5-8 system (BA, MA, PhD)?
Almost all demographers agree that the science of demography has considerably changed in the last twenty or so years, improving its original expertise (particularly in measurement), developing new methodological approaches (micro, longitudinal, multi-level, etc.), and diversifying its research topics. But as I hope I have shown, it remains subject to a number of uncertainties and constraints, and suffers from inadequacies and perhaps even diversion. However, the debate is open and the perception of the discipline (its identity and future) varies from one region, country, school and individual to another. Some observers are pleased with these changes, even speaking of a “new demography”, and optimistic about the future; others (including me) are more doubtful, and are asking themselves questions, while some are seriously concerned about the future of the discipline and its institutions. The history of every science has its ups and downs, periods of certainty and periods of questioning. Demography as such is not yet under threat by any means, but it seems to be at a turning point in its history, as it faces the world’s major social and economic problems, new social and political demands and “competition” from neighbouring sciences, often against a backdrop of limited public funding for research and teaching.

It seems to me that three aspects of the discipline need to be strengthened: 1) its identity or specificity; 2) its social and political utility; and 3) its public visibility. If this does not happen, demography is likely to remain what it is now: a fascinating small discipline that is rather isolated and marginalized, relatively disconnected from the realities of the world, and offering a safe haven to its practitioners.

A number of imperative requirements, relevant to both research and teaching, could contribute to these goals. One might imagine:

- **a more social, rather less analytical demography**, giving greater priority to the social, economic and political causes and consequences of change, to their understanding, and to the interrelations between social subsystems, etc. This does not involve quantification alone.

- **an explanatory demography**: despite some real progress, demography remains and is perceived as an essentially descriptive science, a science of numbers. To underpin its identity and independence, it must venture to explain and concern itself more with the reasons why changes occur. Congresses and
study curricula should give much more space to theories, causality and ideational debate.

- *a more qualitative demography*: the qualitative approach is virtually absent from teaching programmes, and has never really found a place in the discipline, out of ignorance, fear or even rejection on the part of the dominant quantitativists. The point is not to “dilute” the methodology of demography but to strengthen it with approaches better suited to the study of the perceptions, strategies and rationales that underlie individual and collective demographic behaviour. The qualitative is essential for explanation(48).

- *a demography more engaged* with the many key socio-political issues of the world, in both North and South, from local to international levels: social exclusion, poverty, environment, development, violence, etc. In general, demographers have played little part in this, or have done so only recently. Yet when they do, their contribution is often valued(49). As stated by Lassonde (1996, p.177): “By confining its object of study to the microsocial dimension of reproduction, demography is incapable of providing the enlightenment essential to defining the issues of the modern world, and consequently of indicating the appropriate solutions”.

- *a demography taught differently*: all the above suggestions have direct implications for the teaching of the discipline (course structure, textbook content, teaching style), which is highly diversified throughout the world. Let us mention only a few major principles(50) which could be used to shift from a rather “abstract” demography to a more lively, more practical and probably more attractive demography: 1) integrate “techniques” and “explanatory factors” rather than teach them in separate courses(51); 2) give greater weight to theories and conceptual frameworks; 3) stress the practical illustrations of the history of change in the world; 4) develop the computer tools needed for application exercises, for simulation and for error testing in data collection and methods.

## Concluding remarks

Demography is not, in my opinion, an interdisciplinary science or a bridge discipline between the social and natural sciences, nor an interdiscipline, to quote some of the terms sometimes used. It is a science in its own right which, by choice or necessity, has adapted to change and opened up to other disciplines. A danger, often mentioned, would be, as Roussel (1997, p. 27) states, “for it to

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(48) It is impossible to teach, or be competent in all the methodologies of the social sciences, but one could imagine a more even balance between qualitativist demographers, concerned with understanding, and quantitativist demographers, concerned with measurement.

(49) This is true in the environmental field for example.

(50) On the major issue of teaching, see, for example, the report of the IUSSP working group (Caselli 2002), and particularly the texts by Burch and Palloni in the special issue of *Genus*.

(51) As is the case with many courses and textbooks in Europe and North America.
become once more, in a way that is different but just as marked as at the outset, a multiple, protean discipline with no identity or independence”. A sort of auxiliary science or support discipline for the others. The risk exists but it is not inescapable.

Torn from within, assailed from without, demography doubtless stands at a turning point in its history. Its future will largely depend on its ability to adapt and respond to the new social and political demands that will inevitably arise, to sell its “products” and achieve greater visibility at all levels.

**References**


**ABBREVIATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIDELF</td>
<td>Association Internationale des Démographes de Langue Française</td>
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<td>CDC (in Cairo)</td>
<td>Cairo Demographic Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>CELADE</td>
<td>Centro Latinoamericano y Caribeño de Demografía</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CICRED</td>
<td>Committee for International Cooperation in National Research in Demography</td>
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<tr>
<td>EAPS</td>
<td>European Association for Population Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFORD</td>
<td>Institut de Formation et de Recherches Démographiques</td>
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<tr>
<td>IUSSP</td>
<td>International Union for the Scientific Study of Population</td>
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<td>NIDI</td>
<td>Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute</td>
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<td>PAA</td>
<td>Population Association of America</td>
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<tr>
<td>RIPS (in Accra)</td>
<td>Regional Institute for Population Studies</td>
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<td>UAPS</td>
<td>Union for African Population Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNFPA</td>
<td>United Nations Population Fund</td>
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