Orals Reading list: Demography—politics and policy

In this field I aim to explore the evolution of the discipline of demography, looking at both the external influences that have shaped the discipline, and in turn the influence that demography has had beyond its own boundaries. In particular, the inter-relationships between demography and politics are examined, especially with respect to population and development policies and the ‘Cairo Consensus’. The three sections are somewhat arbitrary—many of the readings really fall into more than one of the sections— but they represent an attempt to divide up a continuum from examination of demography as an academic discipline to the policy-oriented movements it informs and inspires.

** Denotes concentration piece.

1. The Evolution of Demography in the 20th Century

The pieces in this section are chosen from amongst the large literature attempting to answer the questions ‘what is demography?’ and ‘where does it come from?’. While every discipline occasionally subjects itself to such introspection, demography seems to stand out in the frequency with which such attempts are made, and the wide variation in answers offered (albeit some of the authors below argue that it is not done enough, or from the right perspectives!). The perception of a need to ‘justify’ the subject to others might perhaps come from the often sensitive and political implications of its findings, as evidenced in subsequent sections.


2. The Interface of Demography and Politics

The papers in this section take us from the above examination of demography as an academic discipline, to the role that demographers have played—deliberately or otherwise—in politics and policy formation, especially in the United States where this relationship has been the most obvious and influential. ‘Politics’ is interpreted broadly here, ranging from the popular political discussion (in the Wilmoth & Ball paper) through US political processes (Hodgson & Watkins), to the workings of International Organizations (e.g. Caldwell). The concentration piece by Hodgson and Watkins examines the forces shaping this demography/politics relationship, focusing especially on the way that so-called ‘Neo-Malthusian’ US demographers during the twentieth century formed and re-formed alliances with the evolving feminist movement(s). The piece culminates with an examination of how these alliances influenced the ICPD, which takes us neatly to the final section of this reading list.


3. Discourse on ‘Population Policy’ and the Cairo ‘consensus’

This final section starts with the official Programme of Action (PoA) from the ICPD, with the rationale that it is often referred to but rarely, in my view, actually read. Attempting to look beyond the ‘UN-ese’, it contains both sections which reveal the drastically altered understanding of ‘population problems’ at
Cairo compared to earlier understandings, and sections which are not such radical departures. The articles in this section examine the lead-up to Cairo, the unfolding of the conference and PoA adoption itself, and the impacts of the ICPD in its aftermath. The papers exhibit a range of standpoints, reflecting the broad variation in responses to the ICPD and the ensuing changes in policy agendas.


