The French Population Debate

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It has generally come to be recognized that Western Europe faces serious, if not intractable, economic difficulties. What Western European leaders have been slower to appreciate is that underlying their economic problem is an equally grave demographic crisis. In order to maintain population size at a constant level, without resorting to immigration, the birth rate needs to be 2.1 per woman. Among Western European countries only Spain (2.1), Portugal (2.1), Greece (2.3), and Ireland (3.2) attained or exceeded this figure in 1982.\(^1\) The lowest birth rate was registered by West Germany, with 1.4 per woman (in Munich the rate fell to 1.2). Demographers predict that if the German birth rate remains at its current level, within fifty years total population will decline from 61.7 to 39.4 million. In the same period, the number of Germans over age 65 will increase to 23 percent of the population, while only 13 percent will be below age 15. Though the German case is especially severe, this demographic trend exists throughout Western Europe. Between 1960 and 1980 the size of the European Economic Community (EEC) population relative to the total world population fell from 7.8 percent to 5.9 percent; by the year 2000 the population is expected to fall to 4.9 percent.

So far France has been the only member state to sound the alarm about this demographic decline. In December 1983 the French Minister for Social Affairs, Pierre Bérégovoy, called for collective action by his EEC colleagues to reverse the falling birth rate. His appeal was received politely, but no joint program was approved. The French preoccupation with \textit{dénatalité}—as they describe the falling birth rate—is at first sight rather curious. Their birth rate, at about 1.8 per woman, is relatively high compared with other EEC countries. Yet the problem of \textit{dénatalité} is an important subject of public

\(^{1}\) Unless otherwise stated, all figures are taken from \textit{Le vieillissement démographique et ses conséquences économiques et sociales. Rapport du Conseil Economique et Social. Journal Officiel, 13 Dec. 1983.}
debate, both by politicians and in the press. At the beginning of 1983, President Mitterrand announced that the falling birth rate would be one of his government’s major priorities during the coming year. Mitterrand, like his Gaullist predecessors, has appointed a minister, Georgina Dufoix, who is specifically responsible for population questions. In a recent interview Mme. Dufoix, who has four children of her own, declared that dénatalité put at stake France’s place in Western civilization. A majority of the French public seems to agree. In November 1983 the magazine Paris Match conducted a public opinion poll on the issue of dénatalité. Out of a sample of 1,000 people, 59 percent thought the birth rate was insufficient, while 54 percent thought dénatalité would diminish French influence in the world. It is difficult to imagine any other European country conducting such a survey, or receiving these responses.

The reason France provides such a striking exception to general European indifference towards population problems lies in her history. Until 1800 France, with a population of about 28 million, was demographically one of the three largest countries in the Western world. Only the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russia matched her in demographic size. At the same time France was indisputably the dominant continental power in Europe. From the reign of Louis XIV to the Napoleonic Empire this supremacy was challenged, but never overthrown, by rival nations. Yet between the Battle of Waterloo and the outbreak of World War II French political power gradually declined. Defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 cost France her position as the pivotal continental state; by the end of the nineteenth century it was clear that she had lost out to Britain in the race for colonies. This political decline was matched by a corresponding demographic decline. Between 1870 and 1940 the total French population remained stagnant at about 40 million, while the German population—not counting the territories that Hitler annexed—increased from 40 million to almost 70 million. French commentators drew an obvious but simple conclusion from this comparison. They believed that the rise of Germany proved that political power was critically dependent on demographic weight: Indeed, at their most pessimistic they argued that population size was the only criterion of whether a nation merited great power status. The fate of Russia in World War I ought to have told them this was not true. Russia in 1914 had easily the largest population of any of the combatant nations, yet she was almost overrun in a matter of weeks by the German army. As the United States demonstrated in 1917, and again in 1944, it is industrial strength rather than crude manpower that determines the outcome of modern wars.

The French failed to learn this lesson because of their own experience during World War I. Apart from Serbia, the French lost more men in this war (relative to the size of their population) than any other nation. According to French government statistics, ap-
approximately 1,325,000 men lost their lives during the conflict, of whom 675,000 were killed in battle, 225,000 disappeared or died in captivity, 250,000 died from wounds, and 175,000 died from war-related illnesses. In addition, over three million French soldiers were wounded without being killed, more than a million of whom were subsequently classified as war invalids. This decimation of a whole generation had profound demographic consequences that are felt even today. A gap appeared in the population which led demographers to describe inter-war France as a nation of old men. Equally significant was the fact that between 1915 and 1919 the annual number of births fell by almost 50 percent. The children born in these years became known as the “hollow” generation; when they reached adulthood in the 1930s it was a foregone certainty that the number of marriages and births would fall accordingly. This created a formidable and ultimately insoluble problem for military planners. In 1935, when the first of the “hollow” generation became eligible for conscription into the army, the recruitment level fell by over half, a situation that repeated itself for the next five years. While the French high command was struggling to make ends meet, across the Rhine Hitler had renounced the Treaty of Versailles and embarked on a program of massive military expansion. This program was still incomplete when Germany defeated France in the space of six weeks in 1940. But Marshal Pétain, who signed the armistice with Hitler, spoke for many of his compatriots when he declared (and the order of his words is important): “Too few children, too few arms, and too few allies—those were the reasons for our defeat.”

Pétain was only one in a long line of French statesmen who lamented what they inaccurately described as the “depopulation” of France. In 1919, Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau announced that the Treaty of Versailles would be a worthless guarantee of national security if the French did not undertake to have more children. In 1937, the former Finance Minister Paul Reynaud argued in a parliamentary debate that France was in danger of losing the next war because of her low birth rate. When he became Prime Minister in April 1940 he warned the French in a radio broadcast that dénatalité would cost them a war with each generation. It is not exaggerating to say that the fear of depopulation was a national obsession between 1900 and 1940. The American economist Joseph Spengler estimated that in 1921 there were more than 80 national and regional organizations dedicated to increasing the French birth rate and defending the interests of large families. The most important of these was without doubt the National Alliance for the Increase of the French Population, which at its peak in the 1920s claimed a membership of 40,000. It was officially patronized by the President of the Republic, and among its most prominent members were the novelist Émile Zola, the industrialist André Michelin, and Prime
Ministers such as Raymond Poincaré, Georges Clemenceau, and Paul Reynaud. The National Alliance lobbied tirelessly for the introduction of what it called a *politique de natalité*, including financial aid to large families, punitive taxes for childless couples, and an outright ban on all forms of contraception. This last demand led to the passing of a stringent anti-abortion law in 1920, whose penalties were progressively strengthened during the next 20 years. In 1942 abortion was decreed a crime against the state equivalent to treason, which resulted the following year in the execution of a midwife from Cherbourg.

This somber event marked a watershed in the history of populationism in France. Since World War II successive French governments have favored social welfare measures, rather than pointless repression, to encourage the birth rate. In March 1945 General de Gaulle declared that France needed "twelve million beautiful babies in ten years." To this end de Gaulle established a new Population Ministry, incorporating a National Population Council, whose task was to draft a comprehensive *politique familiale*. A massive housing program was launched for young married couples, and generous financial aid was offered to help them bring up their children. For whatever reason, the French birth rate did begin to increase dramatically, creating an authentic baby boom in the late 1940s and 1950s. It should be stressed that this phenomenon was occurring throughout Western Europe at the same time, but because of her long history of demographic stagnation the effect of the baby boom was especially striking in France. Between 1946 and 1962 the French population increased from 39,848,000 to 46,500,000, an astonishing expansion in so short a period.

Paradoxically, because France's population increase was so rapid, political concern was all the more intense when a steady decline in the birth rate became perceptible in the mid-1960s. Contemporary populationists, like their Third Republic predecessors, do not hesitate to reach the most pessimistic conclusions about the consequences of *dénatalité*. For instance, the distinguished historian Pierre Chaunu has declared several times that the contraceptive pill poses a greater threat to Western society than the nuclear arms race. Chaunu is supported in parliament by Michel Debré, a former Prime Minister and a consistent advocate of populationist policies. Other French leaders are less extreme than Debré and Chaunu, but no less convinced that the falling birth rate is an issue of major national importance. Former President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing stated, in his political testament *Démocratie Française*, that *dénatalité* was one of the four key problems affecting the nation's future.

In this context it is hardly surprising that the present Socialist government has made the birth rate a major political priority. Indeed François Mitterrand, when he was still a deputy in 1978, declared
that dénatalité was the only issue on which he was in total agreement with the Gaullist Michel Debré. Yet historically there have always been serious ideological problems for the left in supporting populationism, which is conventionally regarded as a conservative cause. Ironically, these problems have never been as severe for the Communists as for the more moderate Socialists. As early as 1887 the French Marxist leader Jules Guesde declared that dénatalité was a national tragedy which threatened to undermine France’s status as a great power. If this sounded rather strange coming from a revolutionary, when the French Communists broke with the Socialists in 1919 they found their own ideological reasons for espousing populationism. In the first place the neo-Malthusian leagues that wanted to legalize contraceptives were dominated by anarchists, who were anathema to the Communists. Second, Communists such as Maurice Thorez, who led the party from the mid-1930s till his death in 1964, argued that if the proletariat systematically practiced birth control they would be too depleted in numbers to win the impending class struggle with the bourgeoisie. Thorez's attitude was largely dictated by Stalin, who outlawed all forms of contraception in the Soviet Union in 1935, fearing that the declining birth rate was a threat to national security. Since 1935 the French Communists have followed the same line, while attacking the reactionary nature of most populationist propaganda.

If this is an ambivalent attitude, the position of the Socialists is even more delicate. Traditionally the problem for the Socialists has been that populationism, at least as it is expressed by organizations like the National Alliance, has always been seen as an attack on individual liberty, and therefore repugnant to the party of the rights of man. Léon Blum, who led the Socialists from 1919 to 1947, was himself the author of a book which advocated the right of couples to conduct extramarital relationships. Blum and his supporters were particularly receptive to the neo-Malthusian argument that it was not the state's business to outlaw birth control, since couples should be free to choose how many children they have. More recently, the claims of populationists like Debré and Chaunu have been construed by the Socialists as attacks on the rights of women. There is some justice to this criticism. Debré argues that the single most important reason for the decline in the French birth rate since 1965 has been the increase in the number of women who go out to work. To discourage them from pursuing careers, he would like to see the state pay them a "family salary" to stay at home and look after their children. In this way he hopes not only to encourage women to rediscover their traditional role as wives and mothers, but also to reduce unemployment. The Socialist government, which includes a Ministry for Women's Rights, has been at pains to dissociate itself from Debré's position. In a recent interview Mme. Dufoix argued that any politique familiale has to take into account the modern woman's
dual identity as both mother and worker. She also made clear that
the government had no intention of repealing the laws legalizing
contraceptives and abortion.

Yet in other respects the government’s support of populationism
is indistinguishable from that of its conservative opponents.
This is particularly true of its nationalist justification for a politique
familiale. Mitterrand publicly agrees with both Mme. Dufoix and
Michel Debré that dénatalité puts the future of French civilization
in jeopardy. He takes this position not merely because he is a nation-
alist in the Gaullist tradition, but also because, like his opponents,
he is acutely concerned about France’s immigrant problem. Nobody
knows for certain how many immigrants there are in France. The
most recent figures published by the government’s statistical service
(INSEE) estimate that at the end of 1982 France contained about
4.5 million immigrants, or over 8 percent of the population. Within
this figure, the largest single national group are the Portuguese, with
about 865,000, followed by the Algerians, with about 805,000.
Other important national groups include the Italians (490,000) the
Moroccans (440,000), the Spanish (395,000), and the Tunisians
(212,000). These statistics are only approximate because the French
government is unable to control immigration properly, which means
that many people enter the country illegally. This is one reason why
the immigrant population in France is still expanding. The other is
that the immigrant birth rate, particularly among women from the
Maghreb countries of North Africa, is much higher than that of the
native French population. According to INSEE, 38 percent of all
families with three or more children have at least one immigrant
parent. INSEE also calculates that between 1975 and 1981, the pro-
portion of children born with at least one immigrant parent, relative
to the total number of births, rose from 10.8 percent to 11.8 percent.

These figures have been exploited by the extreme right in France
to bolster its argument that the country is being swamped by people
of an alien culture. The most important racist organization is the
National Front, which achieved a string of electoral successes in the
autumn and winter of 1983-1984. Yet the National Front’s demand
for repatriation has also been made by conservative populationists
who deny they are racist. In a recent interview Pierre Chaunu de-
clared baldly that immigrants from the Third World had insur-
mountable problems adapting to the French way of life, and should
therefore be encouraged to return home. Michel Debré is on record
as distinguishing between inter-war immigrants, who have been as-
similated, and post-war immigrants, who have not. Jacques Chirac,
the Gaullist Mayor of Paris and former Prime Minister, stated in July
1983 that as far as immigration is concerned “the threshold of toler-
ance has been passed.”

Such menacing statements tend to skirt around the question of
what makes France French. The eminent French demographer Alfred
Sauvy pointed out in a recent newspaper article that "a native of La Réunion who comes to France is both a Frenchman and an immigrant." This is also true of natives of the Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, which like La Réunion—whose parliamentary deputy is Michel Debré—remain part of metropolitan France. In a broader sense, the French never developed a formal relationship with their colonies in the same way as the British. De Gaulle always argued that the colonies were part of a "greater France," which was united by common bonds of language and culture. Even after the colonies won independence in the 1950s and early 1960s it was an article of Gaullist faith that a native of Algeria, just as much as a native of Provence, belonged to the same French civilization.

It is precisely this wider view of Frenchness that is being threatened by the current wave of hostility to the immigrants. While he has deplored the spread of racism, Mitterrand has not hesitated to imply that dénatalité and the immigrant question are two sides of the same problem. Speaking at a ceremony honoring French mothers, he declared: "The nation cannot remain indifferent to the number of births. The decline in the birth rate constitutes a grave menace for the West, and we must take action."

The message may be coded but the meaning is clear. Mitterrand evidently sees a direct correlation between the decline of the West and the population shift to the Third World. At the same time, in company with more conservative populationists, he has chosen a narrow definition of Frenchness, by introducing stricter immigration controls and by facilitating the return of immigrants to their home country. In this respect the present French government conforms to a European pattern. The British government has recently passed a Nationality Act which excludes subjects of Commonwealth countries from full citizenship rights. In Germany Chancellor Kohl has followed the example originally set by Giscard, offering financial incentives for immigrants (mainly Turks) to return home. What makes the French case unique is that for Mitterrand immigration controls are not enough. Only the introduction of a comprehensive politique familiale, leading to a rise in the native birth rate, can protect France—and by extension Western Europe—from demographic and political eclipse.

Unfortunately, there is no firm evidence that government attempts to raise the birth rate have ever succeeded. As early as 1913 the French government offered financial aid to large families, and by 1939—when a Family Code was introduced—a comprehensive politique familiale was in place. Yet the French birth rate continued to decline relentlessly, reaching a record low in the late 1930s. After the war de Gaulle was quick to take credit for the resurgence of the French population, but the truth is rather more complex. The birth rate actually began to rise in 1942, at the height of the German occu-
pation, when the Vichy government was long on populationist rhetoric but short on aid to the family. Moreover, the birth rate peaked in the late 1940s, before the measures introduced by de Gaulle, particularly better housing, had taken full effect. This suggests that, if the post-war politque familiale had any influence on the birth rate, it was to reinforce a demographic trend that would have occurred anyway.

Such a conclusion is supported by an examination of the traditional features of French population policy. Conservative populationists like Debré and Chaunu have always argued that the legalization of contraception and abortion removed one of the major defenses against a declining birth rate. They are almost certainly wrong. Even when France had laws banning all forms of birth control, these conspicuously failed to achieve their purpose. It was widely believed, though impossible to prove, that in the inter-war period at least 500,000 abortions were performed each year in France. Ironically, the legalization of contraceptives might have reduced this figure, since abortion as a form of birth control is a last resort. There are more recent examples to prove that it is virtually impossible for even the most repressive government to legislate effectively in this area. In 1966 the Rumanian government became so concerned about the declining birth rate that overnight it banned all forms of contraception and outlawed abortion. Within a year the birth rate increased from 14.3 to 27.4 per thousand of the population, but by 1973 the figure had fallen to 18.2. The reason was simple: Denied access to modern forms of birth control, the Rumanian people had resorted to traditional contraceptive methods, such as coitus interruptus, to limit the number of children.

If repressive measures to raise the birth rate have failed, there is still controversy over whether other, incentive-based social policies can stimulate population growth. In a general sense it is obvious that the improvement in living standards in the post-war era must have made raising a family easier. It is when the details of pronatalist policies are studied that the picture becomes blurred. The present French government has introduced two measures that it hopes will encourage couples to have more children. Families with three children are now entitled to a state subsidy of 1,000 francs ($125) per month for two years. In addition, from the third month of pregnancy to the child’s third birthday, all families can claim an allowance of 700 francs ($85) per month. Yet it is hardly plausible that this level of child benefit will act as an incentive to families with two children to have another, even considering the extra financial aid they receive if they do. The opposition argues that the government should go much further in granting aid to young couples. There is no evidence to suggest this would achieve the desired result. When in 1977 the East German government introduced a “family
salary” of the kind advocated by Debré, it had no perceptible impact on the birth rate, which is only slightly higher than in France.

Paradoxically, it is the right in France that consistently advocates greater state intervention to raise the birth rate, while the left is much more modest in its aims. Mme. Dufoix repeatedly declares that all the government is trying to do is create a “favorable environment for family life.” This is partly to neutralize the criticism of some feminists, who claim the government’s politique familiale threatens the progress made by women towards full equality. But it also arises from a genuine confusion about what causes the birth rate to decline. In the past the French have produced numerous theories to explain dénatalité. The nineteenth century social scientist Frédéric Le Play believed the French were encouraged to limit their offspring by the inheritance system of partage forcé, which obliged the father to divide his property equally between his sons. By only having one son it was possible to prevent the disintegration of the family estate, and so accumulate wealth for future generations. The novelist Émile Zola argued that dénatalité was caused by the flight from the land, since he assumed that peasants were naturally more fertile than city dwellers like himself. This was certainly untrue. Until World War II France not only had one of the lowest birth rates among developed nations, but also one of the largest rural populations. According to the 1936 census, 46 percent of the French population still lived in communes of less than two thousand people, and their birth rate was about the same as that of urban inhabitants. Yet this did not stop French legislators from perpetuating the myth of the fertile peasant. The 1939 Family Code offered marriage loans to young couples on condition that they remain in the agricultural sector. After the Liberation, de Gaulle demanded that the National Population Council study means to halt the rural exodus. Yet in France maximum population growth actually coincided with massive urbanization, a “contradiction” that the General was unable to appreciate.

Perhaps the most potent myth about dénatalité was that it was connected with de-Christianization. In the late-nineteenth century, French demographers tried to prove that Catholic areas of France had higher birth rates than anti-clerical regions. Before 1940 there was some evidence to support this view. For instance, the birth rate was significantly higher in Catholic Brittany than in the anti-clerical Midi. But it was also true that economically Brittany was a very backward region, and that the Nord—also staunchly Catholic, but with a more developed economy—had only an average birth rate compared to the rest of France. Populationists believed that Catholic areas ought to have higher birth rates because of the Church’s unequivocal teaching on the duty to procreate. The truth was probably more complex. Catholic doctrine concerning family life may well have been influential, but so too was the simple fact of economic hardship.
In general, the present French government has avoided these ideological debates about the causes of *dénatalité*. The most Mme. Dufoix is prepared to say is that the birth rate is affected by certain material factors: inflation, unemployment, and above all poor housing conditions. To this extent the Socialists have emancipated themselves from the unavailing past of French populationism. But in placing so much importance on a *politique familiale* they show that in other respects they are prisoners of the populationist tradition. Such policies have failed before, and offer little hope of working in the future.

This raises the question of whether other countries have anything to learn from the measures being taken by the Mitterrand government to raise the birth rate. The short answer is that they do, but the lessons to be learned may be sobering ones. There is no doubt that if the birth rate in Western Europe continues to decline at its present speed, or even remains at its current level, the social welfare system of the EEC countries will be under enormous pressure. And it is not simply a matter of paying for pensions: A recent French government report concluded that those aged over 65 already "consume" about a quarter of the nation’s health care resources. Similar figures could be produced for Britain and Germany. The burden this places on the working population will grow rapidly if the proportion of old people continues to expand. At the same time, France’s own history—as well as that of some Eastern European countries—shows there is very little governments can do directly to reverse this trend.