

DRAFT
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COMMENTS ON "AN IMPERFECT THEORY TO FIT AN IMPERFECT WORLD"
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I. General considerations

This is an interesting exercise in reflection where Professor Keyfitz, starting from a simple relationship (Population-Resource Density/Difficulty of initiating development), leads us to speculations which, after analyzing some concrete situations, historically proven, conclude in the need to adopt certain measures to lighten the way towards development in those countries which -according to his analysis- would have lost their best historical moment to initiate it.

The study tackles different subjects, all very complex, on which there is no consensus. This lack of consensus embraces apparently very simple terms, such as optimum, wellbeing, initial moment of development, until other complicated concepts dealing with scales and ethical values, ways of organizing social life and the possibility, in the long run, of survival of certain styles of life and consumption considered by many people, until very recently, as the maximum aspiration of many societies.

In such a heterogeneous context, there is some risk of losing the perspective of our discussion around the central subject: theory and demography. In order to avoid those risks, these comments follow the same order than the author's. However, since at times he comes across crossroads, we intend to add, very modestly, some reflections with the only purpose of stimulating an exchange of ideas.

A first subject related to the objective of the study deals with the application of the concept of theory. The document describes a theory or an attempt to explain systematically the role of demographic growth in development and as is clearly stated, it does not refer to a theory of demographic behaviour. This behaviour is already given, and within its context, it has the category of data.

The following questions, for example, can be made when dealing with theory and demography: What is demography as a body of knowledge? How does it develop its search and state its findings? Which is its place within the scheme of sciences?, etc. The answers to questions of this nature would constitute the chapter on theories on demography.

It would also be pertinent to tackle the subject of the theories of demography, i.e., the set of explanations that tell us how and why does demographic phenomena occur.

Prof. Keyfitz' contribution can be listed in a third group, new in many aspects, where the effort is oriented to explain the role and degree of participation that the demographic behaviour, summarized in its vast complexity through the rate of growth, plays in the possibility of development. It should be added that his analysis is made within the frame of a particular type of economic and social organization.

From this point of view, the study is a novelty since when considering the demographic variable within a context where many other variables occur, it is easier to understand the relative incidence that the demographic variable has in the long and difficult way towards development.

II. The exposition

The starting point of reasoning rests on the existence of a relationship between population and resources that would necessarily pass through a point (D_0) where the effort required to start development would reach its minimum. This process, according to the rules of the game adopted in the document, would be unidirectional and therefore once the best chance is lost, it would not repeat itself.

The old idea of optimum appears here with new connotations. It is interesting to note that the problem of measuring both density -in whatever definition adopted- and degree of difficulty of initiating development are deliberately omitted. In fact, we believe that within the frame of theory the matter is not of great importance, since it would suffice with a more or less approximate perception, not exempt of subjectivity, of the demographic evolution in relation to its optimum.

When considering the demographic situation of the third world and its trends, it would not be too risky to think that for the majority of these countries, the moment D_0 already passed several decades ago. Since according to the theory, these opportunities would not repeat themselves, the way towards development could take directions different from those now serving as example.

In this matter as occurs in general with every historical interpretation, the use of analogies has little possibilities of success. In a context of this nature, the "other factors" become very important, leaving the demographic problems within the interpretation of underdevelopment in second place.

With the purpose of showing empirical evidence, the author presents some comparative examples of cases where development occurred even with scarce resources, and cases where in spite of abundant resources, the conditions of life are precarious. Should these examples be interpreted as historical proves confirming the theory? We feel these examples do not suffice, since when isolating the demographic factor from its true context, they lose their value as historical examples. This can be done in ideal mechanistic models, but these models do not actually respond to reality.

Going forward in the construction of the theory and in front of the diversity of situations shown by the countries concerning their optimum moment to start developing, the density concept including the man-made capital in the denominator of the ratio is intended to be broadened. Reasoning in this way, the author soon reaches the conclusion that the present disparity among countries will increase as a result of population growing excess instead of decreasing. Then we would be faced to a divergent perspective, which some other authors have already advanced by using different arguments. We believe that this is a fundamental conclusion because a series of proposals for action are derived from it.

The analysis of increasing divergences between countries is complemented with considerations on market operation and the money income concept.

Here we think that the construction of the theory is in front of another important crossroad more entailed to the action than to the theoretical explanation.

Trade between nations is necessary but it is developed under a contradictory regime generating an increasing divergence among purchasers and sellers. If the theory is correct, the risk to reach a limit point where such trade will not be possible any longer is faced, because of the utmost inequity between the parties. In this way, the contradiction of the system would be undermining one of its important supports. Would it then be convenient to defend the international trade statu quo under the present conditions?

This divergence goes beyond the limits of trade relationships being found in some other areas of the human effort oriented towards development; has an effect on the relationships between countries and between blocks of countries. Therefore a wide field of human activity is reached by its repercussions. Finally, it is a matter applicable to the planet as a whole.

In view of this somewhat discouraging picture, the theory finds the need to revise concepts and values highly appreciated by some societies, as well as to adopt efficient measures to reduce the incidence assumed for the demographic growth within that process.

In that scheme, Prof. Keyfitz tells us his key question: "Why some countries convert their staples into capital and development while others convert them into people?" One answer would raise the doubt and would open the way to solve the indicated problems. It would be interesting to discuss whether the question is valid, to see whether the elements opposite in the reasoning scheme are the same in the reality scheme, and, finally, to consider the possibility of an answer in agreement with capital producers and people producers.

Once the facts have been explained and the demographic variable effect in the future development possibilities of the countries admitted, the document reaches the need to adopt a series of measures particularly affecting the individual's behaviour more than the nations as entities. The measures proposed are based on a new concept of individual freedom for reproduction and would imply a drastic change in some value scales.

Most of what is suggested, as well as its refuting arguments, have already been said before. Therefore, we only wish to remark some especially interesting points. Perhaps the proposal to organize the reproduction market is the most challenging one. The constitution of the family would, through this via, become part of an offer-demand system where the merchandise would be the right to have children. Trade history shows how many distortions have occurred starting from initial trading freedom: commanding buyers and commanded sellers, transnational corporations, black market, political scandals, etc. As man's nature slowly evolves, there are no reasons to think that the new market would be free of such vices.

Drasticity in measures is not so strict as was considered at the beginning because our opinion underlies a statu quo ideal of the market and consumption system with its present characteristics. The measures proposed are an extension towards new scales and already existing values.

III. Some relevant concepts

Taking into account the complexity of the subjects envisaged in the document, it might be interesting to briefly state the principal concepts utilized both in the theoretical explanation and in the proposed measures. We are aware of the risk involved by attributing the author our own judgements. If, in spite of our efforts to avoid it, this were the case, we apologize in advance.

A. Historical optimum moment for development

In spite of being a many centuries old notion, the optimum concept, in general, has cooperated to make discussion darker and deflects it through ways which have not contributed much to the advance of man science. Behind the optimum idea, underlies the equilibrium idea and how society man's behaviour is characterized by a permanent unbalanced condition or at least by successive unstable equilibriums, the social organization substance itself is rather against the use of this equilibrium idea. Besides, it is also full of subjective appreciations depending on the culture -in a broad sense- of each society.

Despite those limitations, the document represents a step forward in the use of the concept giving to it a historical, dynamic and changing value, what opens the possibility of establishing different theoretical optimum situations, depending on the role assigned to the "other factors".

B. The population factor

It has been already mentioned that this factor is considered as data and that the theory shows which is its participation along the development process, especially at its initial stage. To that effect it is an important contribution to the interdisciplinary approach of demographic phenomena.

C. Concept of freedom

It has two expressions: freedom to trade at the individual level (at countries level as well?) and freedom for reproduction. The need of restricting this last one is proposed by establishing a compulsory family limitation. No changes are proposed for the first one. Apparently there would exist a contradiction since, according to the new theory, trade would in some cases be a generator of increasing divergences and that is exactly what is intended to be reduced in a last instance. Perhaps, it would be convenient to re-examine the point and to elaborate a new freedom system which, starting from relationships between countries, would reach a new concept of individual freedom. Within that scheme, coherent from an ethical point of view, freedom to trade and freedom to procreate would only be two expressions among many others.

D. Ethical principles

Being proved the existence of deep differences between rich and poor countries, it is argued that "ethical considerations that apply in rich countries cannot be transferred intact." The first doubt arising from this statement is that, talking about transferences, it would correspond rich countries to establish the ethical system. We believe it rather is a semantic problem.

In fact, in the application of universal ethical principles, there are important differences and newspapers every day prove it. Would the intention now be to create and apply different ethical principles depending on which group of countries you live? And, what is more interesting, who would be in the position to propose such principles and to make them obeyed? As compulsory limitation at the individual's level is promoted, should that rule be extended at the countries' level?

IV. THE ACTORS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE SUGGESTED POLICY

The following is a very brief comment on the role corresponding to the individual and the State within the suggested policy.

The State would directly participate in determining the final family size by limiting -as it is now being done with immigrants- the number of human beings to be added to the country's population. Voluntary procreation would be replaced by the obligation of not passing a certain number of children. The demographic growth would then become an effectively controlled and planned variable.

This proposal would envisage an important change in the frame of individual rights, especially when freedom to decide the number of children wanted has been recently ratified in conferences held by representatives from all over the world. The document states that: "It would constitute gross inequity between people now and people a few years ago from now; those in the present would be given the privilege of choice on family size, but at the cost of widespread famine later".

We believe that the same reasoning can be applied to some non-renewable goods being nowadays mispent or to the excessive energy, air or water expenditures. If the plan proposed is extended, each man would be born having his share of children, water and energy, and, therefore, the free choice for consumption and trading should be submitted to the same restrictions valid for reproduction.