

Warren C. Robinson (ed.): Land, Labour and Population Growth: Theory, Policy and Case-Studies. Collected Papers from 4 Decades

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Warren C. Robinson is a professor emeritus of economics at Pennsylvania State University and was director of the Population Research Institute there. He has worked in the academic field but also for the World Bank, the UN, and USAID. This volume is a collection of 15 papers among the more than 100 published by the author between 1964 and 2005. They are organised into three parts: “Surplus labour” in traditional societies and how policy converts it to a “development surplus”; Policy and other factors affecting population growth; and Why the “transition theory” still proves useful.

Over a professional career spanning more than 40 years, Warren Robinson gradually became a student of Notestein himself, discovering a world deeply divided between a wealthy aging North and a South where economic underdevelopment, resource scarcity and rapid population growth seemed to form an inextricable and terrible Malthusian trap. However, from 1945 to 1973, the peasants from the Third World addressed with some success the most impressive demographic challenge ever met in history, since food production indeed grew slightly faster than population. In the development economics of the 1960s, still deeply influenced by Keynesian theory, “surplus” was a key issue. Indeed, savings were seen as the means to generate investments, which could push technological change and consequently economic growth. However, poor countries were obviously lacking any savings surplus and, instead, had a dramatic “surplus of labour”, particularly in the field of agriculture. Here, Robinson builds on Boserup’s famous book about “The conditions of agricultural growth”. Ester Boserup developed the concept of creative difficulties, showing that demographic growth constrained the peasants to innovation, and that when the conditions for endogenous development were met—i.e. a multi-sectorial economy and a positive social and

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political sanction of innovation—they indeed were more efficient than the policy-makers who promoted a reduction of population growth.

Warren Robinson was one of the first influential economists and demographers to adhere to Boserup's revision of the Malthusian dogma. He particularly contributed to extending and deepening the criticism of neo-Malthusian policies. Indeed, given that the basic components of population growth, mortality and fertility are directly and indirectly related to the economic and social components of development, policies that directly target demographic behaviours without considering the wide variety of direct and indirect linkages are bound to fail. In several papers, some grouped in part 2 of his book, Robinson studies some of those links, like education and human capital, the cost of children within the domestic economy, female autonomy, etc.

In part 3, Robinson defends and illustrates the idea that an efficient demographic policy must have robust theoretical foundations. He believes that the demographic transition theory, associated with John Bongaarts' proximate determinants model, remains "the most useful general approach for understanding the past and also the future of population change in relation to environment" (p. 3). This belief is illustrated by the short provocative comment on the so-called "clash of civilizations" in the last chapter, where Robinson argues "that most of the present hostility and conflict stems from relatively familiar and powerful demographic and economic forces. The East (and South) are growing demographically but lag behind the West (and North) in technology and income per capita. Migration from one region to the other is a natural equilibration process, even if it is unsettling for all concerned. But, demographic growth rates are converging around the world and globalization and technology transfers are raising income standards in the LDCs. So the present imbalances should gradually disappear, the migration streams should dry up and so should the conflicts that have arisen" (pp. 314–315).

I do not fully share this optimism since the future is by no means written, not even by the demographic structures and the demographic transition process. This conclusion is, however, typical of someone who, over four decades, thought through demography. Robinson's collection of essays illuminates a part of an intellectual history of which we are the heirs, and it can help us to think about our own way of positioning population issues in the still lively development debate. This is the main added value of bringing together these papers that are published in good journals and therefore already widely available to researchers in economics and demography: they gain from being read together as an intellectual journey in the world of ideas.