

Book review

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**Danny Dorling and Stuart Gietel-Basten
(2018). *Why Demography Matters*.
Oxford, UK: Policy Press**

The book entitled *Why Demography Matters* (written by Danny Dorling and Stuart Gietel-Basten) describes the role of demography in shaping humans' perception of the world. It tries to highlight the excesses of competence, too hasty conclusions, and mistakes in the assessment of the world around us and in visions of what the future of mankind will look like from the demographic point of view.

The book is composed of 9 chapters, the first of which is an introduction. From the very beginning in the introduction and later in the following chapters, the authors try to fight the common simplistic beliefs connected with demographic change. In the introduction they present two radically different approaches that can be met in public opinion – passive and active ones. The first of them can be explained as succumbing to the will of state and latter as being dependent on unstoppable demographic forces called by the authors 'demography as destiny'. As an expression of their disagreement with these opposing views of the world, they sum up their considerations with a quote

from Giacomo Girolamo Casanova: “There is no such thing as destiny. We ourselves shape our own lives”.

Chapter 2 titled *Measuring Populations* introduces some of the key measurements related to demography. Population statistics can be frequently seen in the media as those elements which support slogans making provided information more valuable and believable. In this chapter the authors pay special attention to the poor quality of demographic data in many places around the world, which has a straightforward effect on reliability of demographic forecasts. Also, this chapter contains the explanation of what information stands behind such indicators as the birth rate, death rate, divorce rate, population growth rate, or total fertility rate. It encourages the reader to think about situations in which those indicators are misinterpreted and not understood correctly and how significant effects this misunderstanding might have. This is also explained by the authors as one of the core areas where ‘demography matters.’ The measurement can serve as a mirror to population opinion and give deeper understanding of the processes around. The knowledge of indexes gives a better sense for the assessment of demographic changes.

Chapter 3 entitled *Destiny and Determination* considers projections and their methodologies and focuses on how people describe populations and their changes. The authors again try to convince readers that the statement ‘demography is destiny’ is not valid. Future populations are not a fixed parameter on the basis of which humans should build their current reality. Projections may be wrong and, as given in examples, were wrong in different countries and points in time. Projections may be even used as a tool to scare people basing on an imagined trend or may be a result of naivety. It should be then regarded by human consciousness as a scenario that ‘might happen’ not ‘must happen,’ and ‘might happen’ only under certain circumstances.

Next, Chapter 4 (entitled *Population ‘Explosion’*) serves to defuse the idea of population explosion. The chapter tells the story of population growth throughout human history. The population size has never risen so fast (2 million more people living on the planet each week). The authors claim that population explosion is a dominant narrative in the global population debate. Here, particular attention is paid to the fact that this suggests further growth, which in turn is only one option for the future of mankind. The authors cite some examples of diminishing urban societies or shrinking countries to emphasise different scenarios for the future population size. They also indicate phenomena of female empowerment, rising environmentalism, and human capital accumulation, which make the twenty-first century very different from the twentieth century to underline how projections of huge population growth could be wrong. A good summary of their considerations in this chapter is a statement that

“one of the worst effects of worrying about growing populations is not worrying enough about shrinking populations”.

The main topic of Chapter 5 entitled *Why No Children?* is the problem of the falling fertility rate especially in Europe, North America, and East Asia. It has come to be indeed seen as a problem by public opinion because the falls in the rates are much greater than it was anticipated. The authors mention some of the reasons for treating falling fertility as a threat to humanity, among others, population ageing, or cultural identity issues coming from growing fear of migrants' cultures and religions. Naming low fertility 'a problem' leads to looking for someone to blame for this, which often affects millennials. This chapter presents many examples of the media's and public figures' opinions formulated in this way. Nevertheless, the authors themselves highlight that they do not find lower fertility as a major demographic problem, but rather as a phenomenon that needs understanding and further investigation. This is also the area where 'demography matters' as demographic measurements lead to better understanding of the processes and through understanding – changing people's lives.

Chapter 6 entitled *Population Ageing* as previous chapters looks at the main topic, which is population ageing from a different perspective than usually is seen in the media. The authors identify treating it again as 'a problem' by public opinion. However, they rather see it as an opportunity for a new understanding of older adults with their 'doterty' (defined by the authors as the inverse of puberty) period of successful and satisfying life in older age. In this chapter we are led to the conclusion that the population ageing is in fact a tremendous achievement of humanity, public health, and medicine after improving mortality and lowering fertility. The authors describe the idea of how to define an ageing population and what goes next after identifying it, namely the pension system. The positive approach of the authors also allows the reader to reflect on the aspects that can reduce the challenges and calm down the worldwide panic. As an example of such a positive eye on the subject is what literature calls 'silver-hair market' ('silver economy'), which is the potential economic power coming from well-educated, experienced, and less manipulatable labour force.

Subsequently, Chapter 7 entitled *Population and the Global Economy* takes into consideration the subject of changing global economy as a result of changing population. A special place is dedicated to the case of migrants from countries with population growth, who very often have become a natural response to the emerging needs of the labour market in countries with population decline. The authors, however, focus on the validity of migration in this context. Firstly, because it is not clear enough why from the economic perspective the world would need a tremendous population growth. The authors argue that shrinking population may not always mean poorer population. Moreover, migration not necessarily can be a solution to low fertility

in countries that accept migrants. After acclimatisation they tend to have fewer children than they would have in their home country. The whole discussion about migration is a next example of the area where 'demography matters'. Fertility rates decrease worldwide, so migration can be a solution to filling skill/labour gaps. Looking for an answer to the question of whether it is a short- or long-term solution proves that 'demography matters', indeed.

Chapter 8 entitled *Population and Politics* discusses very diverse but real stories from around the world, among which there is a common factor, namely the influence of political decisions on the demographic situation. Such case studies as Trump's building of the wall along the Mexican border, Brexit or illegal pregnancy of Singapore's maids are presented and emphasise this influence.

Chapter 9 is a conclusion. The last chapter serves to sum up and one more time highlight that population growth slowdown should not worry. Stagnations of the past prove there is a variety of scenarios that may happen after the slowdown period. Also, since a significant increase and a drastic decrease in the fertility rate can happen within one generation, the decisions of the generation of today's children can evidently change the future of mankind, which today seems evident to many. Since we cannot be sure of any predictions, the authors suggest focusing on helping people achieve their desires rather than worrying about the future of humanity.

The book covers all the major subjects that today's demography deals with. However, it gives an extremely optimistic picture. Mostly it tries to explain other potential scenarios for the well-known pessimistic ones that dominate people's opinions. However, there is a risk that complete ignorance based only on an optimistic vision will result in a lack of response to the risk factors. Also, the book focuses on the demography of the world, but one can feel the realities in which the authors are embedded. They often refer to the influx of other cultures, racism, Brexit, and its negative consequences. The authors' views on the issues mentioned above are perceptible, and the lack of consideration of the other side of the coin raises doubts as to the objectivity of their statements.

Nevertheless, the book can be valuable for both non-demographers and demographers, as it encourages the reader to start thinking about so-called demographic problems from a different perspective than it is portrayed by public opinion. The key aspects of those problems are explained in detail, so it can be useful for those not very familiar with the notions. The number of case studies enriches the reception and shows in black and white what history teaches us. The motivating tone of the book, which says that it is us, the readers, who shape the future, is connected with the well-known psychological principle of 'a carrot, not a stick'. The reader ends the book encouraged and energised.