

The Cultural Impact of the Demographic Factor

YOUSSEF COURBAGE

The role of demography is essential for any assessment of the evolution of intercultural relations as it is a powerful vector of cross-cultural connections and a vital way to reveal mentalities. Courbage explores the cultural impact of the demographic transition across the two shores of the Mediterranean, being a source of numerous modernisation processes and a challenge to the theory of 'class of civilizations'. From the 'youth bulge' to 'immigration', he looks ahead, reflecting how resemblances largely supersede divergence.

The Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll clearly demonstrates that in Mediterranean the lack of knowledge of the other is a reality. Population samples from both Mediterranean shores have expressed a shocking lack of interest towards the other, almost as if both sides were back to back. The economy, culture, lifestyle, religious beliefs and rites of the other have been met with indifference. One European out of three has expressed disinterest about the Southern shore, including on the economy and especially religion (43%). From Turkey to Morocco, many Southern countries have manifested a similar lack of interest in Northern matters (45%) and especially for its religion (55%) (Chart 1.9). Yet, this confusing trend is not homogeneous. Another particular finding was the inability of respondents to geographically locate Mediterranean countries. Even among respondents with considerably less errors, perception is truncated. However, though both shores are barely communicating, a link was simply established via business, tourism, internet or a neighborhood contact to enable the message to pass through (Chart 1.14). Contacts established with Southerners have been strong enough to persuade Europeans that similarities between both shores would prevail over dissimilarities.

Demography used as a Pretext for the Civilisation Conflict

If Europe and the South enjoyed a genuine demographic culture and were not just influenced by the daily hammering of slogans in the media, they would be even more convinced of the rapprochement that we witness. Unfortunately, demography is often perceived as scholarly, didactic and boring, yet it may come to life under the pen of talented writers to excite passions and turn into a heated or fiery debate, which is even more unfortunate. Huntington, who has immortalized the clash of civilizations concept, is now a renowned classic example. His heavily advertised Clash of Civilizations (Huntington, 1996) continues to capture spirits with millions of reprints sold. We, as Mediterraneans,

are at the forefront of this conflict, which unravels like a Greek tragedy through the confrontation of two antagonist civilizations: Christian and Muslim. Where does demography lie among all this? Numbers are the touchstone of the conflict for Huntington. It is claimed to be amorphous on one side and explosive on the other and which line of fracture is more ideal - typical than the Mediterranean one, from Gibraltar to the Bosphorus?

"Population growth in Muslim countries and particularly the expansion of the fifteen to twenty-four-year-old age cohorts, provide recruits for fundamentalism, terrorism, insurgency and migration. Economic growth strengthens Asian government, demographic growth threatens Muslim governments and non-Muslim societies", "...The Resurgence of Islam has been fuelled by equally spectacular rates of growth" (Huntington, 1996). Never since the birth of such discipline has caring for emotions been so dramatic, assigning the role of the villain to demography. The youth bulge is, at the genesis, fundamentalism, terrorism, insurrections and migrations, threats which are equally directed to governments of Muslim and non-Muslim countries. The Clash was written in 1996, and the term coined in 1990 by Bernard Lewis (1990). Huntington was so well heard that a report written by retired NATO officers (Gen. Naumann, et al., 2007) has organized the 6 key challenges threatening the world community into a hierarchy, placing demography foremost, and linking it to the rising irrationality and religious fundamentalism, mostly demonstrated by Islamic radicalism. Recently, Christopher Caldwell (2009), journalist at the Financial Times, has taken on the same 'demographic-civilizational' leitmotiv, that we put on the picture before exhuming catastrophic demographic projections of Tory deputy Enoch Powell on the United Kingdom.

Deconstructing the Huntington Paradigm

No sound and peaceful intercultural relations may exist in the Mediterranean space without deconstructing the

DEMOGRAPHIC REVOLUTION IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN, 1970-2010

CHART4.1

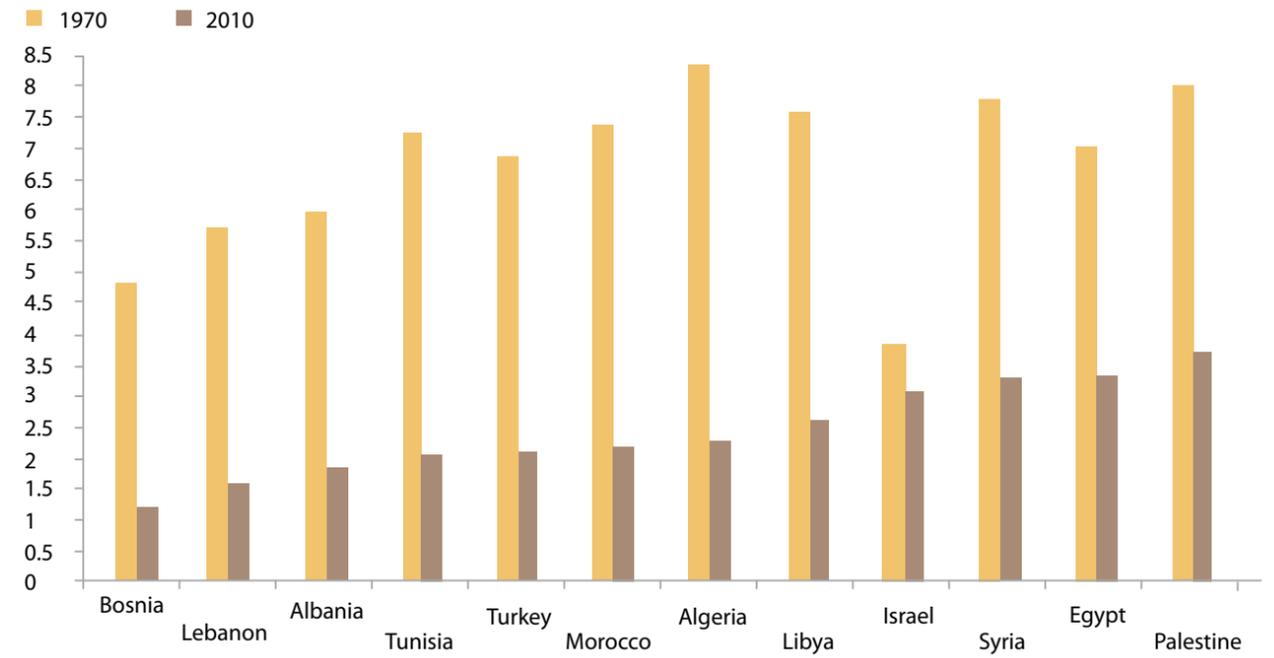


Chart developed by Y. Courbage, 2010

Huntington theory. First of all, on the demographic level, a non demagogic well understood demography may allow an escape from the noise and fury of the media chronicle. As opposed to the Huntington paradigm, it demonstrates the inanity of the illusion of the clash of civilizations; a demographic vision of the world nurturing fears, in the manner of fears nurtured by Westerners of the North shore vis-à-vis Arabs and Muslims of the Southern shore. Indeed, demography may demonstrate the reverse. The paradox is that, during the two decades which have witnessed the birth and growth of the ominous paradigm, rapprochement between the two shores has never before been so strong, carried by a ground swell of demographic convergence. The role of demography is important because it is a powerful vector of interculturality. The demographic variable is not a trivial indicator of the 'state of things' in a particular country: it is essentially a way to reveal mentalities.

Demographic indicators go as deep and intimate as possible: sexuality, union between men and women, reproduction, parent-child relations, misunderstanding, etc. and finally death. Demography is a collective set of psychoanalysis, tables, graphs and Rorschach social tests. Demography covers a wide range. International migration, youth bulge or its antithesis, and ageing have a considerable impact on intercultural relations in the Mediterranean. They are interlinked by the misleading indicator of demographers which is foremost among the phenomena observed and that we have chosen to develop: fertility.

Demographic Transition in the Southern Mediterranean

Despite widespread globalization, the global number of children per woman is on the rise, reaching eight children in the most fertile populations and one child in the least fertile. European populations maintain a very low birth rate of 1.5 children per woman. The 'beautiful model' which is considered ideal, is set at a higher rate: France is the best country in respecting this model, maintaining a birth rate of 2.02 children and a safe population growth rate (Chart 4.1). Europe has achieved considerable progress in this respect. By the mid-18th century, a massive cultural revolution swept the continent. The deepest change was the widespread birth control through contraception. This came as the ultimate consequence of literacy of men, closely followed by women and then the secularization of mentalities. Procreation became a rational calculation, detached from heavenly rules. The current scene in the Southern Mediterranean reenacts this massive cultural revolution. This demographic revolution started off late, but was more dazzling because of its short life span. Except in some very rare exceptions, fertility in the 1970s had reached record peaks: 7-8 children, rarely below 6 (except Israel, whose population was mostly derived from Europe). Europe shifted to modern fertility in two centuries, while the Southern Mediterranean undertook a similar shift in hardly four decades, moving from 7.26 children in 1970 to 2.58 in 2010. With population literacy increasing, the path of modernity paved the way towards reducing

fertility, and became a condition sine qua non of general economic development. In fact, this is part of the universal history of access to modernity. One of the main factors of modernization is the ending of illiteracy. Despite the fact that it has only recently conquered the Southern Mediterranean, it nevertheless remains a remarkable achievement (Courbage and Todd, 2007). On the other hand, despite different levels of literacy that may explain why certain countries are slower than others, transitional failures may superficially relate to Arabic or Islamic cultures. We can find deliberate resistances that have nothing to do with Islam. These forms of resistance are essentially political in nature with a religious cover. For example, in the Middle East conflicts, particularly the Palestinian conflict, have stimulated popular and pro-natalist activities among the population and governments. In many countries, the population number and rate of demographic growth were considered as strategic assets.

In countries with composite population - Israel-Palestine, Syria, Lebanon - the competition between groups plays a role in the increase of fertility. The example of Israel is symptomatic in this respect. Maghreb countries are more distant from this seismic epicenter. Thanks to its geographical proximity and historical heritage, the Maghreb has been more influenced by Europe than the Machrek. Immigration from the Maghreb since independence has been exclusively directed towards Europe, while immigration from the Near East was mostly directed towards the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf. Migrants are commonly envisaged as carriers of culture and maintain permanent contact with relatives in their original country. They could have directly or indirectly passed their attitudes concerning their family, spouses, number of children. Families in the Maghreb are, for example, less reluctant than Near Eastern ones to accept female descendents without a single male heir. With a fertility index of two children per woman, nearly a quarter of Maghrebis accept an exclusively female descent. On the other hand, fertility is higher in the Middle East, where almost everyone is keen on having a male heir. Chart 4.1 shows how Libya divided the two groups in the graph: Maghreb, Lebanon and Turkey on the left side, where the demographic revolution was achieved (or nearly achieved) with nearly two children per woman and, on the right side, Egypt, Israel-Palestine and Syria which remain consistently entrenched in a family of three children. The complex interaction between history, geography, destination of international migrants, role of politics, conflicts and internal rivalries explains intra-Mediterranean differences. Nowhere can we refer demography with a particular religious or national discipline, which would eventually stigmatize Southern populations and rekindle civilization conflicts. The drop in fertility in Christian and Muslim territories and in Northern and Southern shores is concrete and powerful evidence that effectively destroys the Manichean idea of an unbridgeable divide between East and West and the idea that mentalities and behaviours have intangible religious roots.

Perspectives and Lessons Learnt

The demographic convergence of both shores is rich of learning experience. On either side of the Mediterranean, resemblances largely supersede divergences and demography embodies human behavior in its deepest sense. Such convergence has been made possible thanks to multiform interactions, interactions that have continued and renewed till today thanks to widespread education, even if they do it in silence. Exceptions mentioned above are not due to a cultural essence, but more to complex political situations. The forthcoming decades are promising. The youth bulge, though claimed to be the source of violence in Southern countries, has already declined rapidly, particularly in the Maghreb. One of the considerable consequences in the interrelations has been the slowdown of international South-North immigration followed the alleviation of the demographic pressure of young job seekers and the likely mutation of the Southern Mediterranean from the status of emigration into that of immigration and hosting country (sub-Saharan Africa, Asia). In contrast, the ageing that was believed to be the exclusivity of the North has seen such a growth surge that doubling the number of the elderly (people aged 65 years and above) which had taken nearly a century in Europe (114 years in France) will require just 20 years in the Southern Mediterranean. This revolution in progress, which many do not hesitate to qualify as a 'demographic miracle' and others more modestly as 'bonus' or 'demographic dividend' will doubtlessly be at the source of numerous modernization processes: the massive participation of women in the workforce following birth limitations, the improvement of educational systems following the trade off between quantity and quality.

The whiplash of economic investments compared to defined demand investments, less constraining given the slowdown of population growth, will allow the widening of the productive sphere and the creation of more jobs. The saving rate – and consequently investment – will be stimulated by structures and increasingly favorable ages. Demographic transition will quickly translate into a regression of inequalities in national income between social categories, a necessary condition but still not sufficient for the emergence of representative democracies in the South (Courbage, 2001). Yet another essential step towards curbing common ignorance and highlighting resemblances among people is narrating and telling the history of the demographic revolution to people on either side of the Mediterranean. Unfortunately, demographers lack necessary tools, because they are too busy on their model and mathematics. To raise the level of intercultural Mediterranean relations, one could narrate this simple story with the elegance of a story-teller.

YOUSSEF COURBAGE is Research Director of the Institute National d'Etudes Demographiques in Paris.