
La coartada demográfica y el discurso de la involución en España

Andreu Domingo (ed.)

Barcelona: Icaria, 2023. 290 pp. (Akademeia; 193)

ISBN 978-84-19778-41-3

CARLES XAVIER SIMÓ-NOGUERA

Universitat de València

carles.simo@uv.es

When crafting its discourses, the far right's involutionist agenda has drawn from demography as a source of facts and ideas. The way they use it is not solidly grounded in scientific debate and methods, nor do its ideologues mean for it to be, yet this does not seem to pose an obstacle to the spread of their ideas. The book *La coartada demográfica y el discurso de la involución en España* (The Demographic Excuse and the Discourse of Involution in Spain) unmasks these falsehoods and rhetorical simplifications, and reconstructs the origin of the reactionary agenda's allegories and metaphors through the use of demographics. It is an important book for demography, a multiple-author book by researchers in the fields of demography, sociology, geography and even journalism, some of them belonging to or affiliated with the Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics; others with the Universidad Pablo Olavide, the Universidade da Coruña or the Universidad de Sevilla, and still others with the Centro Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC).

The prologue is built upon the idea of the core role of demographics in the political organisation of human societies, especially in issues like population size, composition, dynamics and reproduction. In essay style, Andreu Domingo draws from population theory to point out that the genesis of these views on populational issues can be found both in the revolution of ideas, specifically political liberalism, and in the extraordinary mutations that populations experience in their shift from the old to the new demographic regime. The author traces the production of the involutionist discourse, whose retrotopical and demo-dystopian fabrications use demographics as an excuse, behind the backs of professionals who cultivate this field of study. Due to the key place that it occupies in this discursive production around demographics, the current convergence of neoliberal and neoconservative ideas deserves special attention, even in the prologue.

The body of the book is divided into three parts. The first one brings together three studies on political discourse. Julio Pérez Díaz opens this part with a study on the origins and European

underpinnings of the natalist idea in Spain. The author skilfully relates the evolution of the population dynamic with the arc of natalist notions, with particular attention to Francoist natalism and its failure, the baby boom and the onset of the decline of birth rates in the second half of the 1970s. Particularly important is the research on the stakeholders in the most recent natalist propaganda and their relationship with conservative parties and media, yet whose ranks do not include competent demography professionals. The information this chapter provides on the creators of the natalist mindset and its connection with neoliberal and neoconservative groups is decisive in understanding the current drift of the far right.

Andreu Domingo is the author of a core chapter in the book, the second one. It serves as the backbone upholding the thematic structure of this multi-author volume. It is a substantive chapter for anyone who cultivates population theory with a keen interest in demography's epistemological considerations. It is organised around three demo-dystopian metaphors. According to the supporters of the metaphor of the *demographic suicide*, persistent very low fertility rates will lead us to extinction. The second metaphor, the *demographic winter*, combines considerations on the low birth rate and the ageing of the population. The third metaphor is obsessed with migratory flows as the main causes of the *population replacement* we are condemned to experience, according to its defenders. Most of the chapter tries to get at the origins of these metaphors in order to ascertain the reasons they have become so popular, along with the scant or non-existent role played by demography professionals in crafting these stories and their potential purposes. It claims that the convergence of neoconservatism and neoliberalism lies behind the current involuntarist discourse in their aim to defend capital and combat distributive policies.

The third chapter of the first part, co-written by María Aragón-Morales and Antonia María Ruiz-Jiménez, is an empirical study that uses qualitative analysis of the parliamentary speeches by Vox MPs to study their dystopian stories about the extinction of the Spanish nation, or Spain's *demographic suicide*. The authors show special interest in how Vox MPs integrate this concept into their speeches, what causes and consequences they cite, what policies they propose and how their stories are aligned with those told by other European radical far-right parties.

The second part of the book is entitled "Medios de comunicación y opinión pública" (Media and public opinion). It also contains three chapters, the first one written by Cora Cuenca Navarrete and Juan Manuel García-González. It is an analysis of the demographic discourses that appeared in the news items in four newspapers (*ABC*, *El Mundo*, *El País* and *ElDiario.es*) between January 2017 and June 2021. The analysis is organised according to the demographic changes on which the news items are based, the expressions and metaphors that appear in them, the participating experts and the main topics and concepts used. A crucial observation in this chapter is that the editorial lines of the newspapers studied determine and define the language, stories and types of experts consulted.

The second chapter of the second part, written by Antía Domínguez-Rodríguez and Antía Pérez-Camarés, discusses demographic fables and fears. Their objective is to ascertain the

features of those who claim population catastrophism and to determine the role played by demographic apprehensions in social concerns with the goal of revealing whether there is an alarmist profile. The raw material is the data obtained via an online questionnaire to which 394 students pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology at the Universidade da Coruña responded between May and June 2021. In addition to questions drawn up by the authors, others from the barometer of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) from March 2019 and from the CIS's *Encuesta Social General* for Spain were included. The results obtained notably include the large growth of demographic pessimism among the interviewed university population.

In the third chapter in the second part, Jordi Bayona-i-Carrasco makes a generational study of the importance of demographic issues in public opinion in Spain. The author compiles microdata from different CIS barometers, ten editions of the *European Social Survey* conducted since 2001 and five editions of the *European Social Values Survey* conducted from 1981 to 2017. He uses these data to reconstruct ten-year generational groups where men and women are analysed separately. The opinions on depopulation and ageing; the limits of youth and the initial thresholds of old age; values and attitudes about the family, marriage and divorce; the ideal number of children per family; in-vitro fertilisation; homosexual parents; and the acceptance of immigrants are studied. The results show a deep divide between the opinions of the most distant generations.

The last part of the book is entitled "Piedra de toque" (Touchstone) and it contains two chapters. It focuses on identifying two falsehoods and providing the evidence that debunks them. In the first chapter of this third part, Pau Miret Gamundi aims to prove that what has threatened intergenerational solidarity is not the age structure, particularly ageing and the low birth rate, on which the pension system is grounded, but the evolution of job dependency (the relationship between unemployed and employed persons) in the 16-70 age group. The evidence he provides is enough to redirect the debate towards the dysfunctions of the job market.

In the last chapter, Joaquín Recaño sets out to debunk myths and stereotypes around rural depopulation. He mobilises an extensive set of microdata from censuses, town registers, nomenclature data and secondary sources from other authors. He proves in no uncertain terms that depopulation was detected back in the first twenty years of the twentieth century and is therefore not a recent phenomenon. Caused by cyclical internal and external migratory flows in Spain, this depopulation has been uneven in its intensity, temporality and location. The evidence showing that rurality is not synonymous with agricultural space is also important, and an invaluable part of this chapter is his classification of rural spaces depending on their capacity for resilience, which he determines via multivariate techniques.

In short, this multi-author work is strongly recommended because it broadly represents many fields, not just demography, it accurately identifies epistemological problems and debates that are (mis)guided by clearly unscientific positions, and it provides weighty evidence that contradicts the catastrophic leanings. The annexes mentioned in the text are missing, and some

rather divergent considerations on ageing are detected, which is expected in a collectively-authored book. A few pages are not wholly necessary, and occasionally a few references and sources would help to reconstruct the scientific process. However, these critiques in no way detract from this book's success in both its conception and its results.