

H-France Review Vol. 4 (October 2004), No. 101

**Paul-André Rosental**, *L'Intelligence démographique: Sciences et politiques des population en France (1930-1960)*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 2003. 366 pp. 2 tables, bibliography, notes, index. €27 (pb). ISBN 2-7381-1258-7.

Review by Joshua Cole, University of Michigan.

---

Paul-André Rosental's indispensable study examines the emergence of demography as an autonomous discipline and its association with the state in mid-twentieth-century France. The subject is a highly charged one: the Vichy regime's embrace of both an aggressive natalism and racist eugenic theories during the German occupation gave state-sponsored population planning a sinister reputation in post-war France. Since 1945, when the Institut national des études démographiques (INED) was founded as the Fourth Republic's successor to the Vichy government's undeniably racist Fondation Carrel, successive generations of demographic researchers at INED have had to contend with a perception in some quarters that both their institution and their social science were tainted by a kind of ideological original sin.

The great virtue of Rosental's book is to refuse an essentialist definition of demography--one which claims that there is only one particular form of demographic knowledge, or one particular kind of politics attached to its practice. Rosental has no illusions about the power of demography as a social science with strong state affiliations, beginning the book with the sentence: "La démographie hante la culture politique de la France" (p. 9). At the same time, however, Rosental demonstrates that the emergence of demography as the most important science of population during the middle years of the last century had nothing inevitable about it. Many sciences contended with demography in the early twentieth century and claimed population as an object of study, including biology, economics, psychology, and mathematics. Nevertheless, only demography emerged as the indispensable science of population by mid-century. This success, argues Rosental, was not due to anything intrinsic to demography, but rather to a highly contingent constellation of circumstances and personalities that might easily have worked themselves out differently.

Demography's success in the immediate post-war years, argues Rosental, came in part from its dual concern with both "science" and "action," which allowed policy makers to claim both knowledge and expertise in addressing social problems. Demography also occupied a privileged place at the intersection of two enormous projects, namely, the expansion of the French welfare state and the international project of population study led by the United Nations. For the architects of French social policy during these years, demography provided a necessary point of departure at a moment when the state was expanding its role, both in the economy and in the lives of citizens, while the international scope of the UN project brought French researchers into a global community of scholars whose new techniques were changing the face of population research. For Rosental, however, these facts are not sufficient to explain either the power or the shape of the research agenda that INED's first director, Alfred Sauvy, settled upon in the immediate post-war years, or the eventual boundaries that the discipline would take in the ensuing decades. To understand these developments, Rosental takes the reader back to the peculiar modalities of the late Third Republic, for it is here and not with Vichy, he argues, that the key to understanding the history of demography in twentieth-century France resides.

Rosental's book begins with the creation of the Haut comité de la population (HCP) in 1939, the first government office in France entrusted with the task of coordinating population policy under the Third Republic. The HCP was the result of a suggestion made by Georges Pernot, a Catholic conservative in the Senate, and it is usually presented as the culmination of Third Republic natalism; the latter began in the late nineteenth century but intensified its activities in the 1920s when militants in organizations such as the Alliance nationale pour l'accroissement de la population française found widespread support for their ideas among the governing elite and in scientific circles. Rosental does not question this general account, but he does criticize a tendency in the historical literature to attribute a mono-dimensional political coloring to the natalist movement, and his careful description of the personalities involved in the creation of the HCP shows the diversity of ideological positions that were united behind the natalist project.

The HCP's membership included a mix of activists from the Alliance nationale and parliamentary figures, including Philippe Serre from the left and Georges Pernot from the Catholic right. In the center was Adolphe Landry, a senator whose own political position was on the moderate left but who had served as a minister in various conservative cabinets in the 1930s. Landry was a member of the Alliance nationale, but he was also connected with some of the important *fonctionnaires*, such as Pierre Laroque, who would become increasingly important to the development of the welfare state and population policy in particular. Alfred Sauvy, an economist by training who had worked at the Statistique générale de France (SGF), joined the HCP shortly before it was dissolved by the Vichy Regime. For all of these figures, Rosental argues that a concern for healthy and growing population was simply a part of consensus politics and not just a conservative position. The presence of militants like Fernand Boverat, president of the Alliance nationale, was significant, but this did not mean that the natalist right had hijacked French population policy in 1939.

In his approach to the history of French natalism, Rosental also tries to distinguish between the “reactionary, nationalist or sometimes xenophobic propositions of the end of the twentieth century and the panic which gripped an unprepared France on the eve of war” after the Munich accords.[1] He rightly points out that there were important differences between *populationnistes* who supported any form of support for population growth—including immigration—and natalists who emphasized native fertility and reforms focused on supporting French families. The aims of each of these groups should also be distinguished from the French public as a whole, says Rosental. He suggests that the wider public only became supportive of natalist policies when they began to enjoy the economic benefits that came from family allocations and other forms of financial assistance.

Created in the midst of the Phony War, and a time of chaotic disorder in the administration, the HCP's position in the government was ambiguous at best. Rosental describes it as cut off from other branches of the bureaucracy and unable to get the statistical information it needed from the SGF to coordinate policy effectively. These inefficiencies alone, argues Rosental, are enough to undermine the simplistic argument that only sees demography and population statistics as a tool of social control.

Nevertheless, in the context of the national catastrophe that came with the outbreak of war and the ensuing occupation, the HCP did attempt to adopt a policing function with regard to what it identified as *fléaux sociaux*: alcoholism, pornography, and most importantly, abortion. Rosental argues that the focus on abortion came primarily from the unexamined assumption that all one had to do to solve the population problem in France was to substitute births for abortions. The negative side of this equation, most apparent during the Vichy period, was a draconian regime of punishment for abortionists. The more positive policy emerging from this assumption was a natalist emphasis on family support, which was also a feature of population policy under the Fourth Republic in the post-war period. In his account of the HCP's antiabortion policies, however, I think Rosental missed an important opportunity to explore the importance of gender in structuring policy responses to perceived social crises. Although he notes the contributions of cultural historians of gender in “la construction d'une représentation de la féminité” (p.45), he himself does not ask if an attention to gender might help explain the widespread diffusion of beliefs that, by contemporary standards at least, can only be labeled misogynist. It is possible, moreover, that an attention to gender might go further than Rosental's argument in helping us understand the reasons behind the widespread consensus he finds on most natalist policies during the 1930s and 1940s in France. Readers interested in knowing more about this subject should start with Miranda Pollard's work, *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France*. [2]

Rosental argues that, under Vichy, population policy emphasized familialist policies over populationist programs, but he also points out that these efforts were underfunded because neither the French nor the German authorities gave them a high priority. The HCP was allowed to lapse by 1941, most probably because Philippe Serre and Adolphe Landry had not supported Pétain's bid for full powers in the summer of 1940. Vichy's familialism drew on the teachings of the pre-war natalist organizations, such as the Alliance nationale, but, at the same time, the regime's new offices, such as the Comité consultative d'hygiène de France, effectively brought the familial movement's operations under the tutelage of the state. This realignment would be undone in some fashion by the shift that occurred at the Liberation, which moved the balance back from a narrow commitment to familial policies to a more eclectic populationism that recognized the need for increased immigration to meet France's demographic crisis. Rosental argues that this shift both made the founding of INED possible in 1945 and shaped its relationship to the state and its research agenda. Unlike the HCP, INED would not be dependent on other offices for demographic data,

and the new organization would become an important center for the refinement of statistical analysis and population study.

Vichy's most notorious contribution to French population research was the *Fondation française pour l'étude des problèmes humains*, more commonly known as the *Fondation Carrel*, after its director, Alexis Carrel. The fact that INED was the statutory successor to the *Fondation Carrel* has caused some to highlight uncomfortable continuities between population policy under Vichy and the Fourth Republic. Rosental seeks to place these continuities--some of which he finds misleading--in context. Carrel, a surgeon who was deeply involved in eugenics research, managed to wrest a great deal of institutional autonomy for the *Fondation*, presumably in exchange for the decidedly *Pétainiste* character of its activities. Rosental emphasizes that the very size of the *Fondation* meant many groups of researchers continued to work on their own projects without necessarily being involved in the larger ideological (or explicitly racist) projects sponsored by Carrel. Rosental's argument here will no doubt be seen as controversial by some, for criticism of the *Fondation* has been an important part of those who seek to find a special affinity between mid-twentieth-century European population research and fascism.

Regardless of how one feels about the *Fondation Carrel*'s relationship to the ideas that lay behind some of the most heinous crimes of the century, Rosental's book is especially valuable in tracing the transition from Vichy's population policies to those of the Fourth Republic. Here, as elsewhere, Rosental's contribution is to complicate the history of French natalism--to show that even though natalism was the object of a large and widespread consensus in France, it was also subject to a complicated series of competing agendas and political currents.

In the immediate post-war period, a "social" vision of population planning emerged as a crucial part of the new republic's agenda: "un scénario étatique et social, où la population est toute-puissante et la famille, le absente" (p.78). Rosental associates this vision with the Communist Party and most specifically with François Billoux, one of two Communists who entered the *Comité français de la libération nationale* in April 1944, who became minister of Public Health in September of the same year. Opposed to this social vision was an alternative and less state-centered view of population policy, whose adherents spanned a wide spectrum of conservative thought in France, even included a part of the socialist party. This position emphasized the central role of the family in society, "entendue à la fois dans une perspective normative et comme un principe d'organisation politique et administrative" (p.78).

Situated at the intersection of these two positions, both ideologically and literally, was Robert Debré, a member of the *Académie de Médecine*, well-known for his work as a pediatrician and in the struggle against infant mortality. Debré had also been active in the resistance and had important ties both to communist doctors and also with the Gaullists through the activities of his son Michel. Rosental labels Debré a "syncretist" on population policy who was both a natalist interested in social policy and a vigorous defender of the family. Having little in common with the conservatism of a figure like Fernand Boverat of the *Alliance nationale*, Rosental holds him up as a defender of a potentially progressive program of population planning that was not irrevocably discredited by the extremes of Vichy or Nazi horror. When the supporters of Billoux's "social" vision of population planning ran into opposition from Gaullists who sought to obstruct the influence of the Communists on social policy, Debré's position emerged as the one most compatible with the personalities and sensibilities of the new government.

It was Debré, says Rosental, who was most responsible for getting Alfred Sauvy named director of INED at its founding; together with Landry and a veteran of the pre-war HCP, Jacques Doublet, these three figures were the most important members of INED's *comité technique*. Here, too, Rosental emphasizes the ideological diversity of the committee, pointing out that some militant conservatives from the natalist movement, such as Fernand Boverat, were excluded, while Paul Rivet, a veteran of the Popular Front, and Jean Langevin, associated with the Communist Party, played important roles. Langevin in particular pushed for an activist definition of INED's role, advocating a more political role for the new institute and calling for the organization to participate actively in policy debates. In the end, however, this view did not carry the day, and Sauvy, Landry, and Debré successfully defended a more technocratic vision of INED's role, based upon a culture of experts who would help the natalist project by providing it with a sound scientific foundation.

In the remaining chapters of the book, Rosental discusses the methodological debates within population research that shaped the approaches favored by the first generation of demographers working at INED in the 1940s and 1950s. Interestingly, these are the only chapters that contain fully developed discussions of the content of

demographic scholarship in mid-century France, and it is significant that these sections come only after the carefully researched chapters on the interactive networks of individuals and institutions that eventually resulted in the creation of INED in 1945. This division of the book's story reveals Rosental's own sense of priority, and his general argument that what he calls the second birth of demography during this period owes more to an external and even accidental series of contextual factors than it does to anything internal to demographic research. A hurried reader glancing quickly through these chapters in search of a quick understanding of the origins of the INED will not be disappointed. Nevertheless, the book deserves a closer and more attentive reading, for Rosental's measured tone hides a provocative argument that should serve as both a model and a foil for others working in the history of the human sciences.

---

#### NOTES

[1] "...les propositions réactionnaires, nationalistes parfois ou xénophobes, de la fin du XXe siècle, et la panique qui saisit au moment de Munich une France mal préparée à la guerre," p. 19.

[2]. Miranda Pollard, *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Joshua Cole  
University of Michigan  
jcole@uga.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

*H-France Review* Vol. 4 (October 2004), No. 101

ISSN 1553-9172