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► **To cite this version:**

Virginie de Luca Barrusse. The "Denatality Complex": The Demographic Argument in the Birth Control Debate in France, 1956-1967. Population (English edition), 2018. hal-04018914

**HAL Id: hal-04018914**

**<https://hal-paris1.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-04018914>**

Submitted on 5 Apr 2023

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Virginie DE LUCA BARRUSSE\*

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## The “Denatality Complex”: The Demographic Argument in the Birth Control Debate in France, 1956-1967

In memory of Catherine Rollet

*The fiftieth anniversary in 2017 of the Neuwirth Act authorizing the use of the contraceptive pill in France provides an opportunity to revisit the arguments that fuelled the debate on the use of contraceptive methods and the right to planned parenthood. They cannot be expressed simply in terms of an opposition between conservatives and feminists on women’s rights to control their bodies and their sexuality. The issues are more complex, and in this article, Virginie DE LUCA BARRUSSE shows that the arguments also focused on the collective interest, as expressed in the need to maintain fertility and ensure population growth. Analysing written press archives, the author explores the ways in which the “demographic argument” was used by the various participants in the debate – family planning campaigners, politicians and demographers – during the period preceding the historic vote in 1967.*

In 1956, an association called *Maternité heureuse* (Happy motherhood) started a campaign for the repeal of the Law of 31 July 1920 which banned abortion and the promotion of birth control (Cahen, 2007, 2016; Cova, 1997; De Luca Barrusse, 2008). In 1960, the campaign took the name of *Mouvement Français pour le Planning Familial* (MFPF – French movement for family planning; also known as *Planning familial*, PF). It achieved partial success on 28 December 1967, when parliament legalized contraceptives by passing the Neuwirth Law<sup>(1)</sup> (Bard and Mossuz-Lavau, 2006; Pavard, 2012b). The period between those dates was a time of heated debate, particularly in the press, between supporters of the *Planning Familial* movement and their opponents,

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(1) Named after the member of parliament who proposed it.

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who used a range of arguments, the most insistent and persistent being the demographic argument. They warned of a likely drop in births should the 1920 law be amended; it had been passed precisely to combat the fertility decline observed in the early years of the twentieth century.

This article sets out to examine this “demographic argument” (a term taken from a series of studies brought together by Paul-André Rosental (2007)). Here it defines the use of reasoning based on the multi-faceted concept of population as a geographically and historically situated collective unit. How was this argument used, and by whom, to counter the proposals for a change in the law? In what ways did its introduction affect the terms of the debate? What adjustments came in its wake?

Quite apart from the issue of reproductive freedom, these questions provide an opportunity to explore how this argument was used in the public sphere and how demographic tools and research came to circulate beyond the circle of specialist demographers. To some extent, this article follows on from other studies of the public treatment of demography, in the media particularly, and the results of such media exposure (Brown and Ferree, 2005; Stark and Kohler, 2003, 2004; Valarino and Bernardi, 2010; Wilmoth and Ball, 1992, 1995). These authors have highlighted the influence of the national and historical context, and of demographic trends, on media coverage of population issues. France is doubtless an extreme case in this regard because the demographic transition started very early there, prompting public pronouncements, new laws including the 1920 law, and the founding in 1945 of the French Institute for Demographic Studies, INED, headed by Alfred Sauvy (De Luca Barrusse, 2008, 2013b; Drouard, 1992; Girard, 1986; Huss, 1990; Reggiani, 1996; Rosental, 2003, 2016). Because of France’s particular demographic trajectory and the way it was perceived, the country became increasingly sensitive to population issues (De Luca Barrusse, 2008, 2013b; Rosental, 2003, 2016). This “demographic sensitivity” was expressed in what Dr André Berge<sup>(2)</sup> called a “denatality complex” (Berge, 1961) and the use of the demographic argument in public discussion. Given the circumstances in which this sensitivity arose, the idea that France was exceptional and vulnerable to population decline was hard to shake off, notably in the debate over birth control.

The Planning Familial campaigners responded to the demographers and also to representatives of the clergy who joined the debate. As we shall see, the campaigners’ inputs depended on their individual interests and resources, but also on the constraints that they faced. The campaigners also sought to pre-empt their adversaries’ expected reactions, revealing a certain number of assumptions and values stemming from the “denatality complex”, as shown in the analysis of available sources (Section I). Numerous public debates lent support to these preoccupations, as regards both the singularity of France and

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(2) André Berge was a physician, educator and psychoanalyst. At the time, he was vice-president of the *École des Parents*, an association set up to favour child development and education (Garcia, 2011).

the rapid population growth of so called “Third World” countries (Section II). To obtain satisfaction, the Planning Familial campaigners were obliged to “work around” this complex, as expressed in the reactions to their efforts to modify the 1920 law (Section III). The compromises they were prepared to make reveal values that seem to have been quite widely shared and that reflect this sensitivity to demographic issues.

## I. Available information

The demographic argument did not just suddenly appear in the public sphere in the 1950s (Rosental, 2007). Fertility had decreased earlier in France than elsewhere, and much ink had been spilt over “depopulation” since the turn of the century and then, between the wars, over the decline in births. Newspapers, magazines, leaflets, books, booklets, posters and even postcards reminded people of the associated dangers, proffered multiple recommendations, presented facts and figures, and summarized them in graphs that were discussed even in school classrooms (De Luca Barrusse, 2005, 2008, 2013b; Huss, 1990; Véron and Rohrbasser, 2015). The information campaign continued under the Vichy regime,<sup>(3)</sup> along with injunctions to have more children (Capuano, 2009; Jennings, 2002; Muel-Dreyfys, 1996; Pollard, 1998).

From 1945, INED became the main source of demographic information, keeping pro-birth pressure groups at a distance to affirm its scientific authority (Drouard, 1992; Girard, 1986; Rosental, 2003). “To disseminate demographic knowledge” was one of INED’s missions as laid down by the government ordinance of 24 October 1945 (Girard, 1995). The journal *Population*, which INED began publishing in 1946, was the main instrument for spreading scientific research findings, along with its *Travaux et Documents* book series (Clerc, 1995; Girard, 1986, 1995; Rosental, 2006; van de Walle, 1995). Publications by INED researchers also offered a showcase of the Institute’s work. The best known of these is certainly Alfred Sauvy’s book *La Population, ses lois, ses équilibres*, published under the popular *Que sais-je* imprint in 1944 and regularly re-issued since then (Véron, 2015). In fact, Sauvy played an eminently central role in the process of disseminating demographic knowledge (Dittgen, 1992). He conducted a veritable crusade to make INED’s research findings accessible to all through his many publications and press articles (Drouin, 1992). One such was his column in *Le Monde*, France’s most influential daily newspaper,<sup>(4)</sup> in which he reviewed economic and demographic publications. Thus the demographic argument emerged against a backdrop of long-standing concern which produced a regular flow of information in the public sphere.

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(3) The government of unoccupied France based in Vichy during WW2.

(4) *Le Monde* had a print run of over 200,000 in 1956, 300,000 in 1965 and 400,000 in 1967 (Jeanneney, 2011).

Between 1956 and 1967, it was largely the press that kept the “problem” of birth control in the public eye. The media coverage was skilfully orchestrated by Planning Familial activists in their drive to reform the 1920 law. It was a way to assert the movement’s presence and publicize its action programme (Pavard, 2006). To keep the issue in the spotlight, the earliest campaigners used their networks, especially their contacts in publishing and journalism (Chaperon, 2001; Naudier, 2006). This was very effective; the issue was remarkably well covered in the press, and remained so. It certainly interested readers, judging by their letters, some spontaneous and some responding to requests for personal testimony (De Luca Barrusse, 2013a). According to Planning Familial campaigners, between 400 and 600 articles on birth control were published every month in early 1966 (*Planning actualité*, 4 May 1966, cited by Chaperon, 1995). Whether on the front page or less prominently placed, these articles reported on the campaign’s activities, took position or reported on the various protagonists’ viewpoints, sometimes inviting readers to write in. There were moments when media coverage was particularly intense, for example in 1964 when the Second Vatican Council addressed the birth control issue (Sevegrand, 1995) and from October 1965 when François Mitterrand, then presidential candidate, pronounced himself in favour of amending the 1920 law and so forced other candidates to take position (Jenson and Sineau, 1995; Pavard, 2012b). The presidential campaign also forced the government to react: to put an end to ten years of speculation,<sup>(5)</sup> in November 1965, the minister for public health and population, Raymond Marcellin, commissioned INED to assess the potential impact of a more liberal birth control policy on fertility.<sup>(6)</sup> The press duly commented on INED’s report.

The analysis presented in this article is mainly based on print media content. During the period under consideration (1956-1967), although its influence was beginning to decline, the press was remarkably diverse (D’Almeida and Delporte, 2003; Jeanneney, 2011) and was still widely read. In the 1950s, 80% of the adult population of France read a daily paper (D’Almeida and Delporte, 2003). So not surprisingly, as the debate unfolded, the activists meticulously collected press cuttings to assess the coverage and reach of their efforts.<sup>(7)</sup> The various press dossiers consulted for this article complement each other. Though not exhaustive, they do cover a wide range of input from people of all backgrounds, in a variety of small- and large-circulation publications.<sup>(8)</sup> Not only is the mainstream press well covered, but also the regional press,

(5) Archives of the Haut Comité de la Population et de la Famille, AN 19860269 - article 1, Letter from the Minister for public health and population to the director of INED, dated 5 November 1965.

(6) He also ordered a report from INSERM on “the health consequences of contraceptive pills”.

(7) This article draws upon press-cutting files held in the archives of the Conseil Supérieur de l’Information Sexuelle, the MFPP, the Planning Familial centre in Grenoble (the first such centre, opened in 1961), and also the INED archives, where its archivists have assembled thematic dossiers.

(8) This was confirmed by comparing the content of the press files with a very detailed examination of nine months of the debate, made by Anne-Laure Benilan for her Master’s dissertation (Benilan, 1989).

specialist periodicals and documents published by various political or religious groups. And although television played a fairly small part in the debate, programmes reviewed by the press are included in this study (Levy, 1994, 2008). To determine whether and how the demographic argument was used, abandoned or perhaps modified in other public spheres, transcriptions of unpublished talks and lectures found in some archives were also examined, with detailed analysis of two journals in particular: *Population* and *Planning familial* (successor to *Maternité heureuse* as the organ of the MFPPF). Reviews of the literature were also studied to identify the multitude of publications on birth control.

Our goal was to use this material to identify the stakeholders and their positions, to describe their arguments and rhetoric, and to pick out and interpret the values they revealed with a view to characterizing the demographic sensitivity expressed in the debate and assess its reach. Although little is known about certain participants, the range of sources available made it possible to look beyond the most visible stakeholders. Indeed, it was not only the experts, standing in serried ranks behind the director of INED, who used the demographic argument. It was deployed much more widely, as this article will show.

## II. The nature of the debates and arguments

The debate began with a prominent lecture by gynaecologist Marie-Andrée Lagroua Weill-Hallé to the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques (Academy of moral and political sciences) on 5 March 1955, denouncing the effects of the 1920 law. Responding to a talk given by Alfred Sauvy to the same audience a week earlier, she contrasted the “voluntary sterility” that he feared with “voluntary motherhood”, which would only be possible with a change in the law. In so doing she was anticipating her opponents’ counter-arguments. Her personal network no doubt explains her attentiveness to that argument: her husband Benjamin Weill-Hallé was a paediatrician closely associated with the social hygiene movement that worried about the future of the French population and campaigned for population quality over quantity (De Luca Barruse, 2013b; Schneider, 1990). In the wake of this prominent lecture (it was picked up by *Le Monde*), journalist Jacques Derogy investigated and gathered first-hand accounts of the law’s consequences, with respect to abortion in particular. His analyses were published in *Libération*<sup>(9)</sup> from 15 October 1955. But it was the publication in January 1956 of *Des enfants malgré nous* (Children, wanted or unwanted), the book based on his investigation, that triggered a chain reaction in the press. Marie-Andrée Lagroua, for her part, founded *Maternité heureuse* (Happy motherhood) with a group of men and women from

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(9) Predecessor to the left-wing daily newspaper of the same name founded in 1973 by Jean-Paul Sartre.

the upper classes working in the medical professions, publishing and the social sciences (Pavard 2012b).

Opposition to legal reform quickly emerged, first from Catholics, in the issue of *La Revue de l'action populaire* of 1 February 1956, followed by a blistering response from an INED demographer, Dr. Jean Sutter, in *Carrefour*, a Christian democrat weekly, on 29 February 1956. Under the title “*Un nouvel aspect de la décadence française*” (A new aspect of French decadence), Sutter denounced what he saw as a “resurgence of neo-Malthusianism”. The Communist Party daily *L'Humanité*<sup>(10)</sup> made the same criticism on 2 May 1956. The birth control debate was well and truly launched, and the demographic argument would be a frequent refrain. This was no surprise to Marie Andrée Lagroua. In early 1956, setting out the association's remit in the first issue of its periodical, she acknowledged that “the demographic aspect has particularly drawn our attention” (Lagroua Weill-Hallé, 1956). The care she took from the outset to address the issue of fertility reveals her belief in its strength as an argument and in the capacity of demographers to convey to the public. In short, the demographic argument was expected, and its weight assessed.

## 1. Demographers' expertise

Demographers were the first to use the demographic argument in the media, before it was taken up by other participants in the debate. The timeline and content of demographers' statements in the press show that they needed a pretext to intervene. They found one in the abortion figures. One argument for amending the 1920 law was to put an end to the misery of clandestine abortion endured by so many women. As in earlier decades (Cahen, 2016), journalists put forward some very rough estimates, ranging from 600,000 abortions a year (*l'Action laïque*, *Combat*, *France observateur* and *Paris Presse*) to 1,600,000 (*Demain*). For example, in *L'Express* on 23 February 1956, Françoise Giroud cited the figure of 800,000 abortions a year, equivalent to half of all pregnancies. The figures for abortion-related deaths were also exaggerated, ranging from 20,000 (*l'Action laïque*, *France observateur*, *Libération*) to 40,000 (*Demain*, always prone to overstatement).

Dr Sutter's first article in *Carrefour*, on 29 February 1956, the first to raise the demographic argument in the press, denounced these exaggerated figures. On 11 May that year, Sauvy pointed up some “strange errors”:

for example, the figure of 40,000 annual deaths due to abortions has been cited, whereas the total number of deaths from all causes between ages 15 and 45 (...) is only 12,300, of which only a few hundred are due to abortions. (*L'Express*, 11 May 1956)

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(10) A national daily newspaper founded in 1904 by Jean Jaurès. It became the official organ of the French Communist Party in 1920.

Demographers called for caution in the use of figures. Their interventions confirmed their authority on the matter, discredited those who made exaggerated claims and provided new opportunities for demographers to express their views in the press.

Only Sauvy gave a justification for intervening in the debate. Significantly, it was in *Planning Familial*'s periodical that he explained why demographers were concerned about any changes to the law:

Many people see demographers as proponents of population increase (...). If French demographers often have the reputation of being “anti-Malthusian” or “populationist”, it is because for a long time French fertility was below replacement level. The failure to keep the boat above the waterline had various unfortunate consequences, including excessive population ageing (...), because what is important for a population is not so much its total size as its structure and vitality. So French demographers’ concern about this threat to their country is hardly surprising.

The expertise being developed by demographers at that time gave them authority to pronounce on the collective interest of birth control (Rosental, 2003). Continuing his argument, Sauvy believed that while freedom of access to contraception was in line with individual freedom,

that freedom, like others, is a goal that may seem desirable only under certain conditions (...) To say that no one should be indifferent to their country's future does not mean that every family has a duty to procreate. It means that population change deserves consideration. By change we do not necessarily mean growth, or even stability, but simply that the question exists, and that governments and those concerned for the public interest cannot ignore it. (*Planning familial*, September 1960)

Sauvy was not opposed to reform of the 1920 law but urged his readers to consider the demographic aspect. Through his intervention in the name of the collective interest, the issue of birth control became a demographic problem. From then on, lines of reasoning based on individual interests were overshadowed by the demographic argument.

## 2. French singularity

While Sauvy seems to have been alone in seeking to justify demographers’ involvement in the debate, his colleagues took the same line in defending the collective interest through insistent references to France’s population history. They turned France into a special case that called for close attention to the demographic consequences of any change in the law. The pattern and timing of the demographic transition in France was indeed unusual, but repeated emphasis of its particularity in public discourse created a fixed image of its importance and turned demographic trends, and anything that might disrupt them, into matters of immediate concern.



There were numerous references to the French exception. In *Carrefour* on 29 February 1956, Jean Sutter explained that “the decline in births imperilled our demographic existence in the late nineteenth century”. On 18 November 1965, in *Le Figaro littéraire*, demographer Léon Tabah, research director at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études, reminded readers that “France was the first country to see a decline in births. The change in couples’ behaviour occurred a century earlier than in other European countries”. Such reminders drew attention to the fragility of the current situation. The post-war baby boom, still under way to the puzzlement of watching demographers, was being covered by the media. On 31 May 1956, Sauvy explained in *Le Monde* that

the situation is more favourable than in 1920 when the repressive law was passed (...) We can be glad of this, not through an obsession with population growth or numbers, but because after a century of very rapid ageing, the French population (...) is being rebuilt; from the old trunk weighed down by many old branches, young shoots are sprouting, as a test and a promise of vitality. (*Le Monde*, 31 May 1956)

The fragility of the French situation was seen as justification for warning of the impact of a change in the law: “another drop in births would be like a heel coming down on the head of a drowning man who has just managed to get his head above water” (Sauvy, *L’Express*, 11 May 1956). Sauvy repeated this stylistic flourish a few days later, adding, “we can say with certainty that after another such plunge, the slope to be climbed would feel even steeper” (*Le Monde*, 31 May 1956). This idea of vulnerability was even echoed in parliamentary debate. In July 1967 Dr Coumaros, *député* for Moselle, who opposed any change in the law, asked “Is this really the moment, when France has just miraculously rejuvenated and blossomed anew, with a magnificent burst of vitality and vigour, to adopt a policy of birth control and, inevitably, birth limitation?”<sup>(11)</sup>. The downturn in births, mentioned in discussions about the proposed Neuwirth bill from 1 July, was worrying indeed. In the Senate, on 5 December, for example, Léon Messaud, rapporteur for the social affairs commission, spoke of the “worrying downturn in births. After rising in 1946 above the threshold where generations ensure their replacement, the birth rate is showing a new trend and (...) seems to be falling noticeably; a figure of 16.6 per thousand has been put forward – below that of 1913.”<sup>(12)</sup> The choice of 1913, just before the start of World War I, as a reference point for the prelude to a predicted disaster is not insignificant.

All in all, the presentation of French population trends as a singularity during the inter-war period created a sensitivity to demographic issues that was revived and maintained in the 1950s and 1960s. Although the media did

(11) Archives of the CSIS, Carton 95, Régulation des naissances Documents de l’Assemblée nationale, annexe 231, seconde session ordinaire de 1966-1967, 1<sup>er</sup> juillet 1967.

(12) Archives of the CSIS, Carton 95, Régulation des naissances, extrait, Sénat, séance du 5 décembre 1967.

mention the post-war baby boom, its impact was minimized by presenting it with a wealth of caveats, notably the spectre of population ageing (Bourdelaïs, 1993). There was no excuse for complacency!

### 3. Strong population growth in the “Third World”

Demographers were also reluctant to speak about growth in a context of heated debate over population increase in what Alfred Sauvy called the “Third World” (1952). All confusion was to be avoided; it was vital for the public, readers and TV audiences to understand France’s demographic singularity.

As the so-called “underdeveloped” countries began their demographic transition, France, alongside the other developed countries, expressed concerns about the threat of demographic imbalance (Connelly, 2008; Hodgson, 1988; Wilmoth and Ball, 1995). Countless alarmist announcements appeared in the press, such as the article printed in the current affairs weekly *Noir-et-Blanc* on 12 December 1955. Speaking for “certain population experts”, it warned that “unless we find radical solutions as of now ... in 50 years humanity will be hit by a catastrophe” (quoted by Benilan, 1989, p. 21). *Population and Planning familial* reviewed numerous publications on this question. On 13 October 1960, the *Faire face* TV programme broadcast its first documentary on “birth control”, with Marie-Andrée Lagroua and Alfred Sauvy. The programme began with images of overpopulation and famine: hordes of thirsty children rushing to a water distribution point; thin, haggard men wolfing down bowls of rice. The voice-over for these painful images was grave: “There are about two and a half billion humans on our planet, two and a half billion people who live, work, reproduce and steadily increase the population of a world whose resources are by no means limitless”.<sup>(13)</sup> The issue was a burning one, as evidenced by letters to editors and viewers’ questions. During the *Faire face* broadcast, viewers were invited to phone in and put questions to the studio guests. Of the 295 questions asked, 28 concerned demography: ten referred explicitly to overpopulation, seven to the possibility of conflict between the countries of North and South, nine asked anxiously about imbalance between population and resources, but only two questioners referred to the effects of contraception on population growth in France (Michel, 1961).

Given the risk of confusing population growth in France with that of the Third World, efforts were made to explain demographic processes. The demographic transition received an unprecedented public airing. On 18 November 1965, in a debate titled “For or against birth control” in the *Figaro littéraire*, Jean Fourastié, professor at the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers and the Institut d’Etudes Politiques, gave his expert opinion:

In the past, for thousands of years, mortality ruled. For the number of humans to remain stable, a married woman, if she was not already dead by age 45, had

(13) Archives of INA-TV, *Faire face*, Lalou & Barrière, 13 October 1960.

to have about seven children on average. (...) Under the mortality conditions of today, 2.2 children suffice (...). With current mortality and stable fertility at seven children per woman, the number of humans would triple every 30 years: there would be 240 times as many people on earth as today, i.e. nearly a thousand billion (...) That is the demographers' warning. (*Le Figaro littéraire*, 18 November 1965)

All participants in the birth control debate, whatever their position on amending the 1920 law, agreed that world population growth was of a quite different magnitude to that of France. On 1 February 1956 Joseph Folliet pointed out that “overpopulation in mainland France is a purely abstract problem; underpopulation is a real issue” (*La Croix*, 27 April 1956). Both Marie-André Lagroua and Alfred Sauvy regretted that the *Faire face* broadcast in which they took part began with “the tragedy of overpopulation (...). It is indeed a major and widespread demographic problem, but it has nothing in common with that of France” (quotation from *Télé magazine* reprinted in *Maternité heureuse*, 1960). The demographic argument produced vivid but contrasting images of an overpopulated Third World and an empty, wrinkled France – another aspect of the country’s singularity being population density. In April 1956, in a debate organised by *Le Figaro*, Jean Delteil, director of the Alliance Nationale pour la Vitalité Française (National alliance for French vitality), wrote: “We have 78 inhabitants per square kilometre; Italy has twice as many (...). Apart from Spain, we rank last among Western and Central European countries, but hardly for lack of resources” (*Le Figaro*, 13 April 1956). In 1966, the Haut Comité de la Famille (High committee for the family) pointed out that “France’s population density is below that of its neighbours and the problems caused by a long period of population ageing are still severe”. (Haut Comité Consultatif de la Famille, 1967, p.13).

So France’s demographic singularity focused attention on the consequences of amending the 1920 law. But the argument in favour of renewed population growth in France was in conflict with social concern over the global population explosion. Consensus prevailed in this case; participants in the debate made the distinction between demographic processes in the Third World and trends in France. All agreed that France was an exception.

### III. The campaigners’ response

Once the demographic argument had been tabled, the Planning Familial activists had to respond. Contesting a certain number of assertions, they countered the argument while firmly agreeing with the consensus view that a level of fertility sufficient to guarantee population growth was desirable. The assertion was opportune, and may have been quite genuine on the part of some campaigners. From the first months of the debate, it became part the movement’s strategy to establish a respectable image for itself, and to distance itself from

the neo-Malthusianism of the pre-war period to ensure that its message would be heard (Pavard, 2012b). But even after its respectability had been established, the movement continued to assert its belief in the value of population growth.

### 1. A bypass strategy

With all parties in agreement about France’s demographic singularity, forecasts of future population change became an issue in the debate over the 1920 law. What were the predictable consequences of a change in the law? What risk would it pose for France’s population growth? The demographic argument produced competing scenarios: those defended by the Planning Familial campaigners with the aim of highlighting the benefits for the population of a change in the law; and those which predicted damaging, prejudicial effects.

A quantitative impact on population was the first ill effect mentioned by those wishing to focus attention on the demographic issue. For demographers, the risk was real, as research had shown that “accidental children”, i.e. conceived by accident but accepted (Lagroua Weill-Hallé, 1961), contributed to population growth. Subsequent fertility research has confirmed that population growth is partly fuelled by contraception failures (Leridon, 1987). The surveys of the time, notably those by Jean Sutter among young new mothers in hospitals (Siebert and Sutter, 1963; Sutter, 1947, 1950; Sutter and Morin, 1960), were widely reported in newspapers and the specialist press. In the Planning Familial periodical, Sauvy’s explanations lent support to the campaigners’ actions:

A survey was conducted recently, with all due care, in three maternity units. Out of 1,020 women consulting for pregnancy, 30% said they would have used the contraceptive pill had it existed and 23% could not answer with certainty. Thus the number of unintended pregnancies is far greater than had been thought. (Sauvy, 1960, p. 7)

These surveys gave a measure of the limited efficacy of natural birth control methods; they also confirmed that the introduction of effective contraceptives would reduce fertility.

The Planning Familial campaigners first tried to deny that this might happen by pointing to other countries:

In what countries can it be said that birth control has affected fertility? Between 1932 and 1939 the population of England grew by 1,261,000, while the French population fell by 230,000 over the same period. (Giroud, *L’Express*, 11 May 1956)

They also cited the results of INED surveys – which had also reached a wide audience – on the ideal number of children. For the campaigners, these surveys showed that the ideal family size was large enough to maintain the population (Valabrègue, 1960). But such assertions were less frequent than the previously mentioned ones, because the argument was clearly oversimplified, especially for demographers. Asked for its opinion on “the birth control

problem”, the Haut Comité de la Population (High committee for the population) consulted INED with a view to drawing up a report. Its conclusion was less confident:

The ideal family, as envisioned by French people, is relatively small, with an average of only 2.59 children. Making efficient contraception methods available to couples should enable them to achieve this ideal and not exceed it. But as there will always be couples who, for various reasons, do not reach the ideal, the actual overall number of offspring will always be smaller than the desired number. In this sense, the danger of a fertility decline is real. (Haut Comité Consultatif de la Famille, 1967, pp. 68-69)

A drop in birth numbers was not the only threat. The Planning familial campaigners also had to address the supposed risk of a decline in the quality of the French population. From the start of the debate, the spectre of degeneration reappeared, with the prospect of a deepening fertility gap between social classes (*Population*, 1956). Alain Girard summed up the concerns: there was a risk that contraceptive information “would reach not the most prolific population strata but those that are less prolific and enjoy higher living standards” (Girard, 1959). Thus, with free access to contraception, more advantaged families, being better informed about contraceptive methods and also more liable to use them effectively, would leave it to the working classes to produce large families, thereby causing a decline in population quality.

Rather than counter this argument, the Planning Familial campaigners chose to bypass it: they launched a debate on the indicators of child and adult well-being, making this the cornerstone of population quality. They drew on the results of a survey sponsored by the Milbank Fund on the reproductive behaviour of a panel of 40,000 couples in Indianapolis. Differential fertility was a topical issue and, like many other contemporaneous surveys examining fertility-related attitudes and behaviours, the Indianapolis study was influenced by social psychology, a fast-growing discipline at the time. This is reflected in the publications that reported its findings (Rosental, 2006; Van de Kaa, 1996). The sociologist and journalist Evelyne Sullerot and the legal expert and philosopher Geneviève Texier, for example, used these English-language sources because they gave more detail about the adverse effects of contraceptive failure than did the articles in *Population* that summarized the survey’s main results (Kiser, 1950; Sauvy, 1955; Sutter, 1946; Vincent, 1947). Sullerot and Texier report two major conclusions: satisfaction with married life increases with control of fertility, regardless of the number of children (Sullerot, 1958), and the self-rated health of both men and women decreases with family planning failure (Texier, 1958, 1959). In short, fertility control should be supported in the interests of couples and marriage, but also in the interests of population health. It is noteworthy that the campaigners using this argument had been trained in the social sciences. They were open to the discipline and used its research and its networks to focus the debate on discrepancies between the

desired number of children and actual family size, in other words the so-called “accidental child”. They also used the work of fellow campaigners working in psychiatry, child psychology and the special education sector who were keen to point up the importance of the parent-child relationship (De Luca Barrusse, 2014). These specialists highlighted the link between inadequate early parenting and deviant behaviour. Hence the quality of family relationships, which governs individual psychological well-being, depends upon a “family optimum”, a term coined by the paediatrician Robert Debré (Debré, 1950) and appropriated by the campaigners to contrast with the “demographic optimum”. While demographers defined optimum population size in terms of available resources, optimum family size depended on a “child saturation threshold” linked to factors such as family budget, health of the mother and father, presence of other children in the home, etc. (Lagroua Weill-Hallé, 1961).

All in all, the campaigners did not deny the demographic problem; clearly, they understood its importance. They bypassed the demographic argument, but did so by proposing other indicators of population quality, using the tools, disciplines and paradigms of the budding social sciences.

## 2. Signalling commitment to a “consensus” view

The Planning Familial campaigners’ efforts to demonstrate their espousal of the demographic question did not stop there. They voiced their adherence to a widely-shared belief in the desirability of a fertility level high enough to ensure population growth.<sup>(14)</sup> This was linked to the high value that had been placed on births ever since the start of the twentieth century, and that grew in strength between the wars and under the Vichy government. It gave rise to a social consensus that attributed a particular significance to fertility, and a system of social representations around population growth that persisted through the 1950s and 1960s. This pro-birth stance contained an operative principle that precluded any opposition or counter-advocacy and led to hostile – or at least mistrustful – behaviour towards those who placed the interests of the individual above the collective interest. How was this view expressed in the public sphere? And was it truly a consensus?

The family planning campaigners signalled their commitment to a position shared with proponents of the collective interest by repeatedly asserting that the growth of the French population was desirable and should be supported. From the very first issue of *Maternité heureuse* in 1956, Marie-Andrée Lagroua wrote: “For several years we have been delighted to observe an increase in births, though not yet strong enough to overcome the ageing of the population”. Presenting her action, she added: “It would be out of the question for good French citizens to compromise the much-desired upturn in fertility” (Lagroua Weill-Hallé, 1956). On 11 May 1956 Françoise Giroud wrote:

(14) It was always assumed in the debate that population growth is natural growth. The question of immigration was completely ignored.

However horrific the situation of women forced to go to abortionists, we would not pursue our combat if we had the slightest proof that contraceptives might wipe out the births that France so badly needs. (*L'Express*, 11 May 1956)

This pro-birth position led Planning Familial to reject the term *limitation des naissances* (birth limitation) or the English expression “birth control” in favour of *planning familial* (family planning), which seemed both more positive and more respectable (Pavard, 2012a). Marie-Andrée Lagroua pointed out more than once that “the programme of the French movement for family planning is not aiming for Malthusian birth control” (Lagroua Weill-Hallé, 1964). This is confirmed by their definition of family planning as “all measures designed to promote fertility when social, material and moral conditions are favourable” (*Maternité heureuse*, 1961). As Bibia Pavard points out, although Planning Familial had joined the International Planned Parenthood Federation in 1959, it dissociated itself from some ostensibly neo-Malthusian strategies in the Federation’s programmes (Pavard, 2012).<sup>(15)</sup> The contrast between positive attitudes to growth in metropolitan France and reticence about growth abroad was evident in the press, where fears of Third World population growth were widely expressed; but the Planning Familial campaigners did not focus on it, preferring to avoid any risk of association with neo-Malthusianism. The heated response (Sullerot, 1956) to the INED survey on “public opinion on birth control” in 1956, in the very first months of the debate, convinced them of the need to distance themselves from such beliefs (*Population*, 1956). For the Planning Familial campaigner Catherine Valabrègue, the survey was “inconclusive”: “The answer to the question ‘What do you know about birth control?’ was naturally nothing other than a way of controlling the number of births” (Valabrègue, 1960, pp. 8-9). Dr Henri Fabre went further:

The term birth control (*limitation des naissances*) can convey a pejorative idea. To “limit” is to put a brake on births, opening the door to depopulation. France’s grandeur is imperilled, our national heritage threatened, our economy in danger of death. All successive governments, their radio channels and their press have sufficiently warned against a decline in births for the public to fear its occurrence (...) From the outset, many will have imagined terrible things: factories running slow, countryside abandoned, schools empty, the armed forces impoverished and bereft of Glory. (Fabre, 1960, p. 119)

The survey’s results were unsurprising: 39% of respondents thought that “if women were given every facility to know about and obtain the means to avoid pregnancy” there would be a sharp drop in births, while 39% thought the drop would be slight. Only 13% thought there would be no change in birth numbers. “In the public’s view, a new law would have consequences for fertility in France” (Girard and Raul, 1956, p. 494). The survey’s use of an expression

(15) Though at the same time, with decolonization under way, population experts such as Sauvy and the members of the Haute Comité recommended putting a brake on indigenous population growth in the French overseas territories, for fear of mass migration to metropolitan France (Connelly, 2008).

that considerably biased its results is surprising, especially as it was not the first opinion poll on population issues and demographers had until then paid close attention to the quality of the questions asked.<sup>(16)</sup> But at the time (the questionnaires were administered between 20 May and 30 June 1956), *limitation des naissances* (birth control) was the term used most often, particularly in the media, although the Planning Familial campaigners tried to dissociate themselves from it. Afterwards, demographers used the term *prévention de naissances* (birth prevention) (Sauvy, 1962). So for Planning Familial, one way of asserting their commitment to the pro-birth position was to reject the use of a term that was incompatible with a preference for population growth.

Another approach was to demand policies that support growth, particularly family policies which, unlike the 1920 law, had purportedly proven their efficacy. Like the demographers, the Planning Familial campaigners attributed the fertility increase of the late 1930s to the country's family policy (Hecht and Chasteland, 1960; Valabrègue, 1960). Therefore “what counts for France's demographic future is not the abolition of the 1920 law but the collective measures taken to welcome children and young people” (Michel, 1966, p. 10). The campaigners followed in the footsteps of Sauvy, who went further still, attributing the upturn in births to a pro-family climate, in line with an idea popular between the wars and ratified by the Family Code (De Luca Barrusse, 2008):

If births have risen in the past ten years, it is not only thanks to the material aid that children receive. It is because families have had, in the back of their minds or their subconscious, the impression that society welcomed children with favour, after previously rejecting them. (*Le Monde*, 31 May 1956)

Sauvy expressed this idea on several occasions and it was taken on board by the Haut Comité Consultatif de la Population et de la Famille (High advisory committee on population and the family) (pp. 68-69 of the Comité's 1967 report). It was also cited in parliament.<sup>(17)</sup> All the parties involved in the birth control debate agreed that the state should pursue an actively pro-birth family policy that would counteract the effects of a change in the law.

How widely was the pro-birth position shared? Few Planning Familial campaigners disagreed with it. In *Maternité heureuse*, in June 1959, Alexis Danan fiercely criticized pro-natalism: “We must break free from the myth of numbers” (Danan, 1959). In 1966, it was demographers who were targeted by Dr Pierre Simon:

[Demographers] move in a world of equations, statistics, models and tables. Their influence consists in warnings against overpopulation in one part of the planet and underpopulation in another. They remind us of Malthus' laws, stigmatize the population decline in the popular democracies and brandish

(16) INED archives, cartons d'enquêtes 020, 030, 070 and 072.

(17) CSIS archives, carton 95. Régulation des naissances, Documents de l'assemblée nationale, annexe 231, seconde session ordinaire de 1966-1967, 1<sup>er</sup> juillet 1967.



Pearl's formula to calculate contraception failures. Spreading like a cancer through the administration, they flaunt their statistics which, as Fournier put it, are to their learned outpourings as a lamp-post is to a drunk, a prop rather than a light source. (Simon, 1966, pp. 209-210)

These men's sociological profiles differed from those of the women in the Planning Familial campaign. Alexis Dumas was a journalist and an expert on social issues, writing in support of controversial causes (Quincy-Lefebvre, 2014). Pierre Simon, a gynaecologist and a Freemason of the Grande Loge de France, was among the first Planning Familial campaigners (Pavard, 2012b). Both enjoyed social recognition and an established status, which the women activists did not; for the women, their gender obliged them to associated fertility with femininity; they could not denounce pro-natalism as the men could.

The rarity of such opposition reflects the social control which made it very difficult to speak up against population growth in public debate. Only those whose gender and social position so allowed were able to denounce the demographic argument. And such opposition remained marginal by comparison with the pro-birth consensus.

## Conclusion

On 19 December 1967 the 1920 law was repealed and contraception legalized, under strict conditions. Anti-natalist propaganda was still prohibited. In the end, in the balance of power between the contraception campaigners and their opponents, the most conservative positions became marginalized. Given the social pressure for reform of the law, as reflected in letters to editors, testimonies and INED opinion polls, rigid positions were no longer tenable. In an INED survey of May-June 1956, 43% of respondents were in favour of keeping the 1920 law and as many were in favour of allowing distribution of "the means to avoid pregnancy"<sup>(18)</sup> (Girard and Raul, 1956). By June 1966, 69% of respondents were in favour of liberalizing contraception while 31% wanted the ban maintained<sup>(19)</sup> (Girard and Zucker, 1967, 432). But the conservatives were still on a war footing, as can be seen from the continuation of the abortion rights debate (Pavard, 2012; Pavard et al., 2012).

The use of the demographic argument obstructed the debate about women's and couples' rights, forcing campaigners to argue in terms of the collective impact of liberalizing contraception. Its entry into the debate came as no surprise. The women Planning Familial campaigners, constrained by their gender, aligned with the pro-birth consensus position from the outset; but while using the same kind of reasoning, they developed a different hierarchy

(18) As many men as women were in favour of disseminating contraceptive information. Among women aged 20-49, the proportion was 49% (Girard and Raul, 1956).

(19) Of women aged 20-49, 74% were in favour of liberalization (Girard and Zucker, 1967).

of issues to the one imposed upon them. They made family wellbeing the key to population quality, deploying the demographers’ tools, especially their surveys, but also using input from the other social sciences. In so doing, the campaigners in their turn imposed a model: that of the planned family aware of its “limits” and its optimum size. But the debate’s impact was not limited to contraception, and had a lasting effect on the specialist field of demography: it raised the public profile of demographers’ work, and it prompted INED to produce a report on the country’s demographic situation on an annual basis, rather than at irregular intervals as had previously been the case (Clerc, 1995). It was Article 8 of the birth control law of 28 December 1967 that entrusted the Institute with the task of producing such a report each year, for presentation to Parliament by the responsible minister.

Sensitivity to demographic issues was expressed in an obsession about fertility decline, with the media pointing to France’s exceptional situation and the precautions that it implied. People took positions on what was desirable or not, tolerable or not, in matters of demography. Judging from the media, an updated pro-natalist stance seems to have been quite widely shared. But was this really the case in society at large? This is an important question, because the answer could show how the demographic sensitivity that produced the pro-birth position was expressed in the wider social sphere. It is not easy to answer. But INED surveys do show the extent to which “public opinion” shared the pro-birth position.<sup>(20)</sup> Between 1955 and 1965, between 50% and 59% of survey respondents favoured population stability, giving as their reason a fear of unemployment. Over the same period, on average, one in every two respondents thought that “generally speaking the number of births in France is currently as it should be” (Bastide and Girard, 1962, 1966; Girard and Bastide, 1960; Girard and Henry, 1956; Girard and Raul, 1956; Girard and Zucker, 1967, 1968). Social differences were marked; the higher the respondents’ living standards, the greater the preference for population growth and higher fertility. It was as if the pro-birth position was broadly shared in the public sphere by those who were most visible there, but not in the private sphere where personal opinions were expressed.

However, the sensitivity to demographic issues that gave rise to pro-birth attitudes had quite marked effects. In 1959 people were asked, “In your opinion, how important in France are population issues, that is to say the number and distribution of the country’s inhabitants and how these may change? Very important, important or unimportant?”. Some 27% of respondents (32% of men and 23% of women) thought them very important, 48% thought them important and only 15% unimportant (Girard and Bastide, 1960). In 1965 the results were the same: 30% thought population issues very important, 41% important and only 5% unimportant (Bastide and Girard, 1966). While one

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(20) “Public opinion” was the term the demographers used when commenting on their surveys, seeing them as a reflection of collective convictions and values.

may question the value of findings from a survey run by an institute that places these issues in the limelight, the very fact of which may have influenced some responses, they show that the public did attach importance to population issues. The media's interest in demographic questions, the way they addressed them, and the interest expressed by a large proportion of the population during the 1950s and 1960s, suggest that demographic awareness was deeply rooted.



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### Virginie DE LUCA BARRUSSE • THE “DENATALITY COMPLEX”: THE DEMOGRAPHIC ARGUMENT IN THE BIRTH CONTROL DEBATE IN FRANCE, 1956-1967

In 1956, a campaign by the French family planning movement (Mouvement Français pour le Planning Familial) to repeal the law of 31 July 1920 banning abortion and the sale and advertising of contraceptives sparked a fierce debate in the French media. The campaign finally achieved its goal on 28 December 1967 when the Neuwirth Act was passed, lifting the ban on contraception. The demographic argument seems to have been the one most insistently and persistently used by participants in the debate, who pointed up the potential demographic consequences of changing the law. This article examines this demographic argument, i.e. a reasoning that drew on considerations about population viewed as a geographically and historically situated collective unit. We show that it was the product of a sensitivity to population issues which was reflected in values quite widely shared in the media, notably a “pro-birth position” that reflected a preference for fertility that was sufficient to ensure population growth.

### Virginie DE LUCA BARRUSSE • LE COMPLEXE DE LA DÉNATALITÉ. L'ARGUMENT DÉMOGRAPHIQUE DANS LE DÉBAT SUR LA PRÉVENTION DES NAISSANCES EN FRANCE (1956-1967)

À partir de 1956, les efforts menés par le Mouvement français pour le planning familial en faveur de l'abrogation de la loi du 31 juillet 1920 réprimant la provocation à l'avortement et la propagande anticonceptionnelle donnent lieu à un intense débat médiatique. Ils aboutiront le 28 décembre 1967 avec le vote de la loi dite Neuwirth. L'argument démographique auquel recourent les intervenants dans ce débat apparaît à la fois le plus insistant et le plus tenace. Ils appellent à la vigilance quant aux conséquences démographiques de la modification de cette loi. Cet article en examine l'argument démographique, c'est-à-dire le recours à un raisonnement faisant appel à des considérations de nature diverse sur la population en tant qu'unité collective, géographiquement et historiquement située. Il est le produit d'une sensibilité démographique qui conduit à l'expression de valeurs relativement partagées dans l'espace médiatique, en particulier la « valeur natalité » qui traduit la préférence pour un niveau de naissances assurant la croissance démographique.

### Virginie DE LUCA BARRUSSE • EL COMPLEJO DE LA DESNATALIDAD: EL ARGUMENTO DEMOGRÁFICO EN EL DEBATE SOBRE LA PREVENCIÓN DE NACIMIENTOS EN FRANCIA (1956-1967)

Desde 1956, los esfuerzos del Movimiento francés por la planificación familiar a favor de la abrogación de la ley del 31 de julio de 1920, que reprimía la provocación al aborto y la propaganda anticonceptiva, dan lugar a un intenso debate mediático. El 28 de diciembre de 1967, estos esfuerzos conducirán al voto de la llamada ley de Neuwirth. El argumento demográfico utilizado por los oradores en este debate aparece a la vez como el más insistente y el más tenaz. Los participantes advierten sobre los efectos demográficos de la modificación de la ley de 1920. Este artículo examina dicho argumento, es decir el recurso a un razonamiento que utiliza consideraciones de naturaleza diversa sobre la población en tanto que unidad colectiva, geográfica y históricamente situada. Se trata del producto de una sensibilidad demográfica que conduce a la expresión de valores relativamente compartidos en el espacio mediático, en particular el “valor natalidad”, que traduce la preferencia por un nivel de nacimientos que garantice el crecimiento demográfico.

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**Keywords:** demographic argument, birth control, media, family planning, France

Translated by Harriet Coleman

