GUSTAVO DE SANTIS

Demografia

Il Mulino, Manuali, 2010, 341 pp.

In Gustavo De Santis's new textbook, Demography, the careful reader will detect the marks of a "Florentine" tradition of textbooks, initiated several years ago by Massimo Livi Bacci and later followed by Antonio Santini. The author explicitly acknowledges his debts only to the former, and to his "Introduction to Demography", first published in 1981, but traces of the latter can easily be found in the accurate formalization and in the methodological rigor that characterize his presentation.

Tradition, yes, but also innovation, and it is this second element which will likely strike most readers. At first glance, the approach is indeed rather "classic": how to correctly carry out a descriptive analysis of phenomena pertaining to populations. But then, the first novelty arrives: the chapter on "Data sources" is not at the beginning, as in most textbooks, but instead comes last. The reason for this is explicitly stated in the introduction: sources of data can frequently be a boring subject, especially for those who do not yet know what kind of data they need, why or what to do with data once it is collected etc. Better, then, to start by arousing the reader's curiosity with problems, questions, possible connections between phenomena – data sources, like Heaven, can wait.

Indeed, and here comes the second innovation of the book, the majority of the examples that the book highlights do not derive from actual data but are invented by the author. Again, there is logic behind this unique, and somewhat shocking, choice. On the one hand, it permits De Santis to show that certain methods can prove useful in disciplines other than demography: university careers, consumption of diapers or ice creams, annuities, etc. These and other topics intermingle with deaths and births, or with migration and marriages without affecting the homogeneity of the presentation. On the other hand, with small and handy tables, readers are not at risk of "drowning in numbers", and they can concentrate on what the author deems more important: concepts, methodological issues, consistency between analysis and synthesis, etc.

The classical themes of population studies are all there: definitions, tools, Lexis diagrams; population structure and growth rates; standardization. Each of the main demographic phenomena (mortality, nuptiality, fertility, and migration) are considered first by themselves in a specific chapter. Later on, the author tries to show his readers that, in many instances, two or more processes must be considered together. For example, reproduction deals with a combination of fertility and survival and population projections must also take into account migration issues etc.

Virtually each chapter, even the most classic, has one or more of what one may call "modern grafts". Chapter on mortality and survival also deals with

quality of life (i.e. morbidity and disability). There is more than just nuptiality in the chapter that is very wisely titled "Couple formation and dissolution". It attempts to study marriage-specific fertility in a way that proves consistent with the analysis of fertility in general. This includes not only Princeton's famous indexes (If, Ig, Ih, Im) but also an original breakdown of the Total Fertility Rate.

What is most striking about this book is the tone that the author adopts throughout. It is a perennial dialogue between the author and his readers. One almost has the impression of him being there in in person. There are impromptu questions about the connections between the subject under scrutiny and some similar concept already discussed a few pages before (where exactly?), jokes, digressions on the meaning of certain indices, and lots of imaginative examples. Every possible effort is made to capture the reader's attention and keep it alive. The abandonment of the traditional attitude of the academic writer (detachment, neutrality, creation of an aseptic environment, solemnity) may sound unfamiliar to those, including myself, who are used to a more classic approach to university teaching, but it will probably put several readers more at ease: the young, or those who come from other domains and disciplines.

The text makes every possible effort to present things in a simple manner. Every passage is explained; there are several questions and answers and a list at the end of each chapter reviewing the most important concepts that have been discussed. Not to be underestimated, there is also a rich set of appendices, where all the useful mathematical notions (i.e. logarithms, derivatives, Cartesian diagrams, equations, etc.) are briefly, but clearly, explained. Only the basics of everything can obviously be touched upon but the essentials are all there.

Upon a second reading, however, the text reveals its depths. Several ideas, apparently just hinted at in passing, reemerge between the lines. The analysis of individual data, for instance, is not dealt with, but all the problems of causal inference are thoroughly discussed. Selection problems are constantly in the background but aptly brought to the foreground every now and then, and right- and left-censoring is discussed. In short, those who will take the time to read the book twice will find much more than the almost casual tone would suggest. It presents a positive approach and the right intellectual stimuli for going deeper into the discipline.

The book is appropriate for virtually every undergraduate demography course, but also fits the needs of those who come from other disciplines and want to learn the basic tools and ideas of populations studies. Unfortunately, it is only in Italian, and the rest of the world is thus missing an opportunity: books both this entertaining and useful are rare to find!

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