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Demografie

McGraw-Hill, Scienze Umane, 2011, 332 pp.

It is not immediately clear how many and what are the “demographies” that the title of the book is referring to.

Nor is it easy to classify the book into a specific typological category.

It is not exactly a manual, suffering from a lack of didactic continuity in the sequence of arguments. Perhaps it is something more, certainly something different. It is not a monograph, the reader gets lost so much amidst the many arguments presented, nor is it a compendium, the caliber is often anything but synthetic and there are multiple connections to other disciplines.

The volume interprets the richness and complexity of the demography (variety of themes, of analytic methods, of “angles” and interpretations) as a plurality of the discipline itself, thereby arriving at the new term “demographies”. Perhaps an innovation?

It certainly is an attempt, by a book that deals with “demographies”, to offer this variety of paths, approaches, and themes, thereby allowing the reader to autonomously reassemble these multiplicities into the unicum of the discipline. And the attempt seems to be perfectly successful.

A vision of demography emerges, here defined as “the science of passages”, that is at times fascinating.

The volume is organized in eight thematic chapters, each of which consists of four lessons on a theme. The topics encompass spatial-temporal questions, logic of the structure/process, with an interesting historical contextualization of great events and major revolutions in population and medicine. This contextualization introduces the reader to the appropriate historical/political and socio-economic environments.

The major transitions and great revolutions are competently evoked and duly illustrated in their own fields. The mortality and fertility transition, as well as the health transition, are explicitly connected to the scientific revolutions and the historic events that were crucial for them.

The past and the present are continually intertwined, as for example in the analysis of large population migrations, starting from their origins. Therefore, the monumental changes that in the passage of time changed the conditions and trajectories of humankind are highlighted and repeatedly brought up to explain peculiarities of the present reality.

A quick, but in depth, look is given to the great regions, following a geo-demographic course, according to the flows of movements which marked the epochs of large migrations, from and to Italy, for example. In natural sequence, the problem of population policies, at the global level, is discussed. The focus

is on population growth, family planning and reproductive health.

In light of this global vision, the author discusses the excessive “compartmentalization of the regional demographies”, each of which is characterized by its own problems, own methodologies, and own sensibilities. He claims this is a direct cause of the lack of an underlying theoretical and technical corpus for the discipline. And this is why some key phenomena of the study of population are depicted with particular reference to the geographic area where they are most prevalent: aging and poverty in Asia, health and fertility decline in Africa, and mobility in Latin America.

In closing, context, networks, generations, and families are presented as the fundamental reference categories for the most recent approaches in population studies. To describe the modern assets of the tool kit of the discipline, four different methodological areas are presented. They are not exhaustive of the breadth of methods but represent key topics in mathematical demography and its related areas: survival analysis, multi-level approach, diffusion models and models of stable populations. The latter, having roots in the classic demography, always represents an effective means to study the development of human populations.

If at this point one thinks that there is an excessive fragmentation of the arguments, the solution follows immediately. The text, in fact, is completed with a sort of topographic map to help the reader more easily follow a personal reading path through the text and use it in different and more extended ways, even for teaching.

It is difficult to list who could benefit from reading this book: for students, a richer integration not only of basic demography, but also of social demography, population policies and historical demography courses. For teachers, interesting tidbits of information that are useful for teaching; for the researcher, as a source for going deeper in various directions, to the passionate reader of historical, social, demographic studies, to anyone curious of facts about population that are always interconnected and juxtaposed with the others facts of the world.

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