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**150 years of official population statistics in Italy**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

After the unification in 1861, the Italian population underwent major transformations: from farming society to post-industrial society, from country of illiterates to country with a large percentage of highly educated men and women, from poor to rich country, from country of emigration to country of immigration, from a monarchy to a republic. Simply in terms of numbers, the population has more than doubled overall, going from 22.2 million in 1861 (within the current borders) to 59.4 million today<sup>1</sup>. This evolution can be classified into eras and phases and also interpreted through the history of official statistics which are developed at the same time as, or in many cases following, socio-demographic changes.

Over the past 150 years, socio-demographic analysis has progressively developed in order to capture and study the truly radical changes in events and behaviours. These changes, concerning both life styles and qualitative changes in cultural representation, have broadened the field of study (and observation analysis methods) to include adapting reconstructions and applying empirical findings to understand the complexity of various phenomena. The development of quantitative analysis methods, the birth of new demographic theories and the growth of disciplines on which demographic interpretation tends to be based, underscore the need to design and gather population-level statistics to better respond to the new demands for interpreting the dynamics in progress. Starting with the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the recognition of political arithmetic as a method of good government of public spheres, the utility of "demographic statistics", and thus demography, was highlighted. The collection of aggregate data to understand population figures and structures led to the progressive autonomy of demography during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moving away from the mere application of statistics, and after the strong integration and concordance between public statistics and demography in the period 1920-1930, the two areas became progressively and more markedly detached over time (De Sandre and Favero, 2003).

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<sup>1</sup>The latest data on the Italian population from the 2011 census are available at <http://censimen-topopolazione.istat.it/i-risultati/default.html>. The population in 1861 within the current border is available at [http://seriestoriche.istat.it/fileadmin/allegati/Popolazione/estensioni/Tavola\\_2.1.1.xls](http://seriestoriche.istat.it/fileadmin/allegati/Popolazione/estensioni/Tavola_2.1.1.xls).

The aim of this paper is to highlight the relationship between population statistics and the changes in socio-demographic dynamics and the legislative framework from Italian unification until now. Special attention is given to highlighting the role of institutions and their specific choices regarding the production of official statistics. We have chosen to divide the last 150 years into five different periods:

1. From 1861 to World War I (1861-1915);
2. The years between the wars (1915-1945);
3. The period after World War II (from 1945 to the 1960s);
4. The 1970s;
5. From the 1980s until today.

## 2. FROM THE UNIFICATION OF ITALY UNTIL WORLD WAR I (1861-1915)

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy was still mainly a farming country. The early stages of industrialisation came later than in other European and non-European countries (Cameron and Neal, 2005). The north-western regions experienced industrialization first, while in all other regions, the rural population remained underdeveloped. The gap between the North and the South (which was still linked to *latifundia*, a system of landowning based on very extensive parcels of privately owned land) was very wide in the 1800s. This gap was also due to the political fragmentation of the peninsula. The unification of the country opened the potential possibility of more favourable conditions (Armengaud *et al.*, 1971, 545) but these were not sufficiently exploited. The extension of the Piedmont legislation and economic policy to all areas of the territory had very different repercussions. The issues in the South not only weren't resolved but continued and even got worse (Bedeschi, 2002).

From a demographic point of view, post-unification Italy experienced a sharp decrease in mortality, particularly child mortality but a slower decline in fertility. Indeed, life expectancy increased from approximately 30 years in the first decade after unification to around 45 in 1910. The fertility rate remained high at around 5, gradually dropping in subsequent decades, beginning in the North-Western regions. The rapid population growth deriving from these demographic dynamics, which was particularly intense in rural areas, led to high emigration. Between 1861 and 1911 almost 4 million people left Italy. Education levels in Italy were low, and improved very slowly. In 1861, male illiteracy stood at 74% and female illiteracy at 84% (Cameron and Neal, 2005, 339). The school system was governed by the Casati Law of 1859, extended to the Kingdom (and remaining in place until the Gentile Law of 1923), with public education, funded by the municipalities, being compulsory and free for the first two years of primary school. However, the compulsory nature was not endorsed until 1877, when it was also extended to include the first three years.

In 1911, 55% of the active population still worked in agriculture, 30% in industry and transport, and 5% in trade (Armengaud *et al.*, 1971).

The Unification of the newly formed Kingdom led to the promotion of "political arithmetic" to describe the essential dynamics and resources of the population, mainly for the purposes of state administration. The measurement of demographic phenomena using aggregate data was seen as an essential element for understanding resources and as a basis for policies for the promotion of economic development. Cavour, the first Prime Minister of the Italian Kingdom, previously, previously a member of the *Commissione Superiore di Statistica* (High Commission for Statistics) established in Turin in 1836, was particularly sensitive to the structure of the official statistics body. Generally speaking, statistics was considered a crucial resource in order to construct the idea of a national population.

The *Ufficio di Statistica Generale* (General Statistics Bureau) founded in 1861 by the minister Filippo Cordova at the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce (MAIC) was in charge of managing the works across all of Italy, establishing the principle that "the most absolute concentration of directing the works lay in the very nature of the statistics service" (ISTAT, w.d., 34; Lombardo 1994). The first and most absorbing operation of the Statistical Bureau was to organize the first population census (established by Royal Decree of 8 September 1861), called for on 31 December of the same year. The census, whose aim was to ascertain the number of inhabitants currently living in the municipalities of the Kingdom, was conducted in an unexpectedly efficient manner and enjoyed the full collaboration of all the local authorities. The latter were provided with all the means necessary to overcome the practical difficulties arising mostly from the illiteracy of more than two thirds of the population. The existence of the already re-named *Divisione di Statistica Generale* (Division of General Statistics), however, suffered from a number of serious limitations, both due to its position within an (admittedly important) Ministry, which objectively created difficulties in horizontal coordination with other Ministries, and problems of vertical coordination and data transmission between the peripheral provincial councils (which in turn coordinated the municipalities) and the central division (D'Autilia and Melis, 2000).

Beginning in 1862, the efforts to assure the organic unity and state centrality of the collection of statistical data, including that concerning the status and movement of the population, fell under the responsibility of Pietro Maestri. Under his direction, a second demographic census was organised in 1871, which was of great importance for a number of demographic reasons: the recognition of the principle of ten-yearly censuses; the acquisition of the legal value for the state and its administration of the municipal and provincial population figures verified in the Census; the establishment of municipal population records based on the new census and the publication of annual summaries. Moreover, information about Italians abroad was collected through a survey based on aggregated data provided by embassies and consulates.

The census was increasingly recognised as a crucial government activity. Its implementation in the Kingdom undoubtedly marked the conclusion of a long period of strengthening of relations between the peripheral data collection structures and the central body, above all in terms of establishing and imposing uniform data collection criteria in the different provinces. After the death of Maestri in 1871, Luigi Bodio was appointed as director of the Statistical Bureau. In 1878, the bureau was raised to the grade of an office (*Direzione Generale di Statistica - Dirstat*). From that time until 1898, Bodio was the Director-General and, by virtue of his office, a member of the *Consiglio Superiore di Statistica* CSS (Superior Council of Statistics), which was founded in 1882 and comprised ministerial representatives, statistics experts, and the president of the permanent committee, established in 1887 in an effort to reorganize official statistics and resolve the problem of centralised coordination of statistical data collection by all Ministries (Gilman 1910; De Sandre and Favero, 2003).

Having acquired greater autonomy, the Dirstat issued a wealth of demographic publications thanks also to pressure by non-political members of the CSS also operating in the Dirstat, such as Paolo Messedaglia and Angelo Mantegazza. The increase in institutional attention to the population issues was connected, also internationally and scientifically, to the debate deriving from the revitalisation of the Malthusian theories and their effects on the links between population and economy.

The 1870s and 80s saw the crowning of an organisational project which brought state statistics to a fairly stable level of services, indeed becoming one of the fundamental activities of the central administration. This particularly fruitful period saw the continuous exchange between the organisation of official statistical data collection services and the cultural and scientific debate around the results of the gathered data, which fuelled much of the national and international consensus between politicians, public administrators, and academics.

The *Annali* bear witness to the abundance of this activity. Between 1878 and 1898, 139 volumes were published. Among others, worthy of note are the studies of Luigi Perozzo on the classification of the Italian population by age, the height curves of military recruits, Del Vecchio's work on marriage between blood relatives and its effects, Rameri's studies on the populations of the territorial compartments<sup>2</sup>, and statistics on the cause of death beginning in 1882. Moreover, the so-called Jacini Inquiry on the health and hygiene conditions of the municipalities of the Kingdom (1881-1886) produced a clear analysis of the underdeveloped conditions in of the vast rural populations as well as the geographical differences in norms and values that later led to changing marital and reproductive behaviours.

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<sup>2</sup>In 1861 the kingdom of Italy was divided into 59 provinces and 11 territorial compartments. After the annexation of Veneto (1866) and Papal States (1870), the number of provinces has become 69 and compartments 16.

Towards the end of the 1880s the Dirstat budget was reduced. In the following decade, Italian official statistics entered a deep crisis. Many of the surveys begun in the previous decade were suspended and the number of publications greatly decreased. Even the 1891 census was cancelled due to lack of funds (Ipsen, 1997).

In the early years of the 1900s the debate started to focus on the emerging dynamics, including the growth of urbanisation and the first hints towards a drop in birth rates. These issues, which basically linked demography to key topics of social analysis, were developed with a neo-nationalist perspective. Interdisciplinary debate increasingly took on ideological connotations for and against the neo-Malthusian practices which started to become popular especially in the urban areas (Ipsen, 1997; Treves, 2002). Among others, we may cite Giorgio Mortara and Marcello Benini's studies on the spread of neo-Malthusian behaviour, Livio Livi's studies on the Jews, Corrado Gini's work on the differences between the sexes and the demographic factors of the evolution of nations.

The new director of Dirstat, Giovanni Montemartini, used newer methods, including field investigations, as well as a different organization of the central and peripheral structures. A specific attention is given to mortality analysis (discussion about causes of death classification: Aschieri and Coletti, 1914; life tables 1899-1902: Bagni, 1912; mortality by cause of death 1901-1910: Mortara, 1914) and migration data: Aschieri and Coletti 1914). Nevertheless, the direction of Montemartini was interrupted with his early death in 1913.

Generally speaking, the beginning of the century is characterized by a dispersion of the national statistical structure's energy and functions. The efforts of ministers Luigi Luzzati and Francesco Saverio Nitti to reform the statistical system were interrupted by World War I. By this time many political and economic interests were focused on emigration and the possibility to colonise new African territories. Attempts had been made to control migration abroad since the start of the new century, and 1901 saw the establishment of the General Commission for Emigration (CGE) which had the task of monitoring, protecting and controlling emigration. On the one hand, attempts were made to protect emigrants from unscrupulous recruitment agents. On the other hand, particularly during the war, the need for recruits led the government to issue "nulla osta" permits required to obtain a passport and therefore emigrate.

### 3. BETWEEN WORLD WAR I AND WORLD WAR II

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the decline in birth rates, linked first and foremost to the spread of birth control, was perceived as a threat to the power and prosperity of the nation. During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was massive emigration, which started in the last decades of the previous century. Emigration was originally interpreted as a phenomenon that compensated for the high demographic growth, but soon was seen as a social

evil which generated demographic imbalances and needed to be strictly channelled, if not limited. In Italy, the Fascist government became an avid supporter of a pro-natalist vision, whose fundamental aim was to increase the population (the objective was to increase the number of Italians from 40 to 60 million by mid-century), limit emigration to foreign countries and populate reclaimed areas and Italian colonies in Africa. To achieve these objectives, specific policies were designed to directly increase the number of births. The R.D.L. (Royal Decree Law) no. 1542 of 21 August 1937 was the most organic attempt to increase fertility, given that for the Grand Council of Fascism "the demographic problem, being the problem of life and its continuation, is in fact the problem of problems" (Volpi, 1989, 111-112). A whole range of population policies were passed including loans to couples under 26 at the date of marriage aimed at supporting new family formation and lower the age at marriage, tax deductions proportionate to the number of children, special provisions for state employees linked to the number of children, rules for the protection of female staff working in state institutions during pregnancy and early motherhood, and a celibacy tax. Moreover, internal movements and in particular urbanisation was discouraged in the belief that the cities were responsible for the development of anti-natalist attitudes. However, despite the efforts of the Fascist government, birth rates continued to fall. During this period, more than others, fertility transition occurred through the spread of individual and couple behaviours which contrasted strongly both with the legal system in force and the set of traditional ethics (De Sandre, 2005).

The interest in population growth required a more analytical knowledge of its size and an understanding of natural and migratory dynamics. This in turn called for an improvement in the official information system. The national statistical system was reorganised, leading to the birth of the *Istituto Centrale di Statistica* ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics) in 1926. With an initial annual budget of 2 million lira and with Corrado Gini at the helm of the CSS (the Management of ISTAT was established only in 1929), ISTAT set out to be, at least according to the intentions of its founders, the "tool for government action in the present and the future" (Ipsen, 1997) and was purposefully placed directly under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, centralising all services.

"Demographic statistics" held a key position within the renewed body. Indeed one of the main tasks of ISTAT was, through the production of demographic data, to measure the effectiveness of population policies and to indicate the areas on which to concentrate efforts in order to bring about improvements. Parallel to the birth of the new Institute, staff training was also stimulated through the creation of new "Statistics Schools" within universities, as an integral part of the courses running in Political Science and Law faculties, including the availability of scholarships.

From a scientific viewpoint, areas of research multiplied and statistical methodology was significantly developed. While mortality analysis was by now consolidated, new methodological approaches to the study of fertility (Del Chiaro, 1940), in dynamic population models (logistics curves, Lotka models) moved towards an increasingly more specific and disaggregated use of data and a reconstruction of the fundamental information sources for demographic analysis (Sandre and Favero, 2003). During this period, scientific committees and associations sprung up, supported by significant public funding and contributing to the debate on the data collection, analysis methods and population theories. Among others, it is worth mentioning the *Comitato Italiano per lo Studio dei Problemi della Popolazione* CISP (Italian Committee for Population Studies), founded in 1928 under the leadership of Corrado Gini, and the *Comitato di Consulenza per gli Studi di Popolazione* CCSP (Consultation Committee for Population Studies), established by Livio Livi in 1937. The CISP formed as a national section for the newly created International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP), an organisation consisting of national committees. However, the CISP decided to leave in 1931 because of IUSSP's refusal to hold its first congress in Rome. The IUSSP was afraid that the organization's known pro-natalist stance could threaten the neutrality of the scientific meeting (Cocchi and Favero, 2009). The CCSP immediately filled the vacancy within the IUSSP and after only three scientific meetings, in November 1938, it became the *Società Italiana di Demografia e Statistica* SIDS<sup>3</sup> (Italian Society of Demography and Statistics). Both Gini and Livi were two eminent scholars who covered positions of primary importance also within ISTAT. These committees dealt with cyclical population theories, differential fertility by social class, biological bases of childbearing behaviour, population optimums, and links between demography and socio-economic performance. Furthermore, in 1939, the *Società Italiana di Statistica* SIS (Italian Society of Statistics) was funded by statisticians close to Gini (Gaetano Pietra, Marcello Boldrini, Paolo Fortunati). Its activity mainly focused on the development of "scientific research in the field of statistical discipline with special attention to statistical methodology" as underlined in the article 1 of his statute (Pietra 1939).

Generally speaking, the political class's interest in the demographic field was never as strong as it was during the Fascist period. Progress in research mainly followed the government's populationist and pro-natalist vision: research was published on large families and municipalities experiencing a demographic decline. The *Annali* also published documentation on the regulatory and administrative action promoted by the government to assure demographic increase (De Sandre and Favero, 2003, 33). Particular importance was

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<sup>3</sup>In 1950, the society extended its field of interest to include economics and then changed its name to the current *Società Italiana di Demografia, Economia e Statistica* (SIEDS).

given to migration towards the African colonies and internal colonisation<sup>4</sup> as well as the negative effect of migration on fertility. Although far more important phenomena in quantitative terms, emigration and internal mobility, particularly from the countryside to the cities, were progressively abandoned as a field of research and soon disappeared completely from scientific debate.

Despite the pro-natalist approach which unreservedly accepted and promoted the advantages of a growing population, the Fascist period saw a significant improvement in the quality of Italian statistics. This was due to the interest of the government which also led to increased funding (Ipsen, 1997). Several new initiatives were undertaken such as the publication of statistical volumes on vital registrations and causes of death (1927) and the monthly *Notiziario Demografico* (1928) which had been previously suspended, the conduction of a survey on the fertility of Italian married women within the 1931 census, and the inauguration of the Faculty of Statistics, Demography and Actuarial Sciences at the “La Sapienza” University in Rome (1932). Moreover, a reform promoted by ISTAT was introduced establishing a periodical succession of general demographic and economic censuses.

The development of the centralized statistical system was inevitably halted in 1939 when the Second World War broke out. On September 3rd of that year, Mussolini ordered the suspension of all statistical publications, with the exception of demographic statistics.

#### 4. AFTER WORLD WAR II

After the war, Italy was in poor economic health. Inflation and poor infrastructure conditions, particularly in transport, made it difficult for activities to take off immediately whereas the population had to deal with poverty and a lack of housing (Volpi, 1989). However, the years immediately after the war were very important for the country. The national constitution was drawn up, transforming Italy from a monarchy to a democratic republic with universal suffrage. Public finances were strongly improved laying the foundations for the subsequent economic recovery. Taxes were progressively increased and an economic system based on free trade was put in place (including the devaluation of the lira in order to promote export sales). A political balance was established designed to last many decades (Baldi and Cagiano de Azevedo, 2005).

In this context, the interests of the re-established ISTAT focused mainly on the statistics/economics sector. The 1950s and 60s saw a strengthening of administrative statistics, the development of national accounts and the imple-

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<sup>4</sup>One of the first tasks of the ISTAT was to establish and improve on colonial statistics. Moreover, the 1931 census listed both the indigenous population and the European populations in the Italian colonies in Africa (Ipsen, 1997, 284).

mentation of two large sample surveys: the labour force survey<sup>5</sup> and the survey on family budgets. These were followed up with the survey on family consumption in 1968 (Bonarini, 2006). These surveys responded to the pressure of the Parliamentary Inquiry Commissions on Poverty and Unemployment in Italy which, through a previous survey held in 1951-1952, underlined the extreme poverty conditions of the Italian population and a great divide between North and South (Braghin, 1978). Although these survey results did not lead to specific policies, they marked the return to a late 19th century tradition of research on the economic and social condition of the country carried out by the legislative powers, as in the case of the Jacini Inquiry on agriculture. In this regard it is worth noting that the presumed connivance between population scholars and politicians during the Fascist period represented an awkward inheritance for the demographic community in the years following the Second World War. This led to a purely descriptive use of demography, strongly reducing the attempts to interpret reality and eliminating all forms of ties with political action.

Whether it was guilt or not, economic issues were prioritized over demographic ones. This inevitably led to the development of a statistical organisation which was unsuited to monitoring important social transformations, such as the increase in marriage and fertility, the return of emigration abroad immediately after the war, the baby boom, the strong migration from the south towards the industrial triangle and Rome, and the process of urbanisation.

However, the first real attempt to deal in more detail with the social conditions of the Italians - although motivated by the demands of the national accounts - was made only in 1957 with the *Indagine su alcuni aspetti delle Condizioni di Vita delle Persone* (Living Conditions Survey). The survey was repeated in 1965 and in 1973, and gathered information on reading, listening to the radio and watching television, cinema attendance, expectations concerning children's jobs and smoking habits. In the same year the *Rilevazione Campionaria sulla Morbosità* (Sample Survey on Morbidity) and the *Indagine Speciale su alcuni aspetti delle Condizioni Igieniche e Sanitarie della Popolazione* (Health and hygiene Conditions of the Population Survey) gathered information on the incidence of chronic and acute diseases, permanent invalidity and hygiene conditions. ISTAT gathered information on trips and holidays experienced by Italians for the first time starting in 1959 (ISTAT, 2006).

The situation did not further evolve in the 1960s. The decade was characterised by undisputed cultural changes, first and foremost the emancipation of customs and the awareness of women's role and rights. Women contributed significantly to both changes in family life and changes in legislation, effectively modifying behaviours, as recorded in the *Indagine sulla Fecondità* (Fertility Survey) conducted within the 1961 census.

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<sup>5</sup>The first sample survey on the labour force was carried out in 1952 in the provinces of Sicily, Milan, Pisa and Naples. The survey became national, and quarterly, from 1957.

## 5. SOCIAL AND LEGISLATIVE TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE 1970S

The Seventies were a period of great reforms in reproduction, family life and employment, in which it clearly emerged how profoundly Italian society had changed. Divorce was introduced into Italian legislation in 1970 and survived the abrogative referendum of 1974. In 1971, law no. 30 marked a fundamental step in assuring the social relevance of maternity, guaranteeing greater protection for working mothers through the introduction of the right to (compulsory and optional) maternity leave, the prohibition of dismissal and guaranteed pay conditions. In the same year the Constitutional Court repealed the crime (punishable under criminal law) of propaganda, diffusion and sale of contraceptives<sup>6</sup>. Family law (law no. 151) was reformed in 1975 which not only raised the marriageable age to 18 years (before it was 16 for men and 14 for women) and lowered the coming of age from 21 to 18, but also affected the still unequal relations among married couples and between parents and children. In the same year, law no. 405 introduced public and private *Consultori* (well-woman clinics) and governed family and maternity care services, moving towards the provision of safe motherhood initiatives. The abortion law, which aimed to decriminalise abortion and offer better health care to women, without however recognising abortion as a method of contraception, was approved in 1978. The law survived an abrogative referendum in 1980. Health care reform (law no. 833/78), which established the National Health Service as a universalistic public system guaranteeing healthcare for all citizens, occurred in 1978. This reform also implemented article 32 of the Italian Constitution, which sanctions the right to health of all individuals.

These fundamental steps, which were the result of deep cultural transformations started several years before, had immediate implications not only on family life and family planning choices, but also on society as a whole. The decade saw a drastic drop in fertility and nuptiality, an increase in age at marriage and age at first birth. In these years, completely new behaviours such as informal cohabitation, civil marriages (from 4% to 12% during the decade) and an increase of out-of-wedlock births, also appeared. Although the incidence of these trends had much less impact than in other countries of Central and Northern Europe, Italy too experienced a progressive shift from normative and socially accepted attitudes to more individualistic values which substantially modified behaviours, as suggested by the "second demographic transition" theory (van de Kaa, 1988, 2004; Inglehart, 1990). Finally, emigra-

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<sup>6</sup>Despite this law, the Minister of Health persevered to maintain the provision prohibiting the sale of contraceptives in pharmacies through the application of some regulations dating back to 1927. To get round the problem, pharmacies sold the pill as a menstrual cycle regulator, spermicides as personal hygiene antiseptics and so on. Only in 1976 were these regulations finally abolished (Baldi and Cagiano de Azevedo, 2005).

tion began to decline and the first immigration flows from abroad started to be recorded.

Despite the profound changes in behaviour and legislation, and the heated debate within the scientific community, official Italian statistics continued to pay little attention to socio-demographic issues and the developments in academic methodology. In the period of the De Meo presidency (1961-1980) ISTAT focused on the development of statistics in the areas of economic studies, national insurance, social budgets, and national accounts. Despite the international debate on social indicators and the use of sampling methods for observation, the most important socio-demographic statistics remained anchored to vital population registers and censuses. The few attempts to improve the range of data available on these issues include the repeated sample surveys which had begun in previous years and covering specific sectors such as trips and holidays (after the first edition in 1959, it was repeated in 1965, 1968, 1972, 1975, 1978, 1982 and 1985), reading (after the first edition in 1957 it was repeated in 1965 and 1973), sports (1959, 1982, 1985) and the (attempted) redesign of the exhaustive demographic statistics yearbooks following the logic of *événements réduits* (Santini, 1992). About the latter point, on the one hand, this laid the foundations for obtaining indicators between events (e.g. correctly calculating rates according to the duration since a specific event). On the other hand, it led to such a large amount of unmanageable paperwork that the ISTAT partly but rapidly reneged on its decision.

In order to understand the intense transformations underway particularly within families, living arrangements, reproduction and birth control, some researchers from the universities of Padua, Florence and Rome attempted to extend the tight boundaries of Official Statistics and in 1979 performed the *Indagine Campionaria Nazionale sulla Fecondità* INF-1 (National Survey on Fertility)<sup>7</sup> within the broad, worldwide comparative sample survey project on reproductive behaviour called World Fertility Survey (WFS). ISTAT preferred to not take part in the project given the "sensitive" nature of the questions.

The idea that the measurement of demographic phenomena should be adapted to the real modes of occurrence of life events experienced by individuals originated in the 1960s. In fact, vital events and their sequence over the life course do not necessarily correspond to the criteria by which administrative bodies will detect them (Santini, 1992). Mere aggregate data, although finely classified according to age, birth cohort and year of occurrence, was no longer sufficient in providing solutions to research areas that were not purely descriptive. In other words, the need arose for a substantial reorganisation of the now obsolete data production system in view not only of the profound transformations taking place in society but also of the methodological devel-

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<sup>7</sup>The main results of the survey were published in De Sandre *et al.* (1982).

opments. One of these was certainly the evolution of the notion of the life course as a complex manifestation of individual life paths marked by specific sequences (Elder, 1985). This new perspective, based around the concepts of cohorts and longitudinal analysis developed during the 1950s and 60s<sup>8</sup>, sees time as fundamental for defining and substantiating demographic change. Population could no longer be thought of as a set of individuals observed in a given time, but rather a set of biographies, which are formed, overlap and die out over time. The elective observational approach became a sample (and not exhaustive) approach, possibly longitudinal. Over the following years this perspective, a real paradigm shift in socio-demographic observation and analysis, gradually took shape. It became an actual research method thanks to the development of specific statistical techniques (*event history analysis*) that could handle events spread across biographical paths in a multi-dimensional perspective (Mayer and Tuma, 1990), taking into account also the spatial and temporal context.

## 6. THE LAST 30 YEARS

Towards the end of the 1970s ISTAT began to improve the quality of not only economic but also demographic, social and health information, updating contents and observation methods. The results of these efforts were seen in the early 1980s, when several relevant socio-demographic surveys were launched, aimed at addressing the backlog of delays. In 1980, after health care reform and the birth of the national health system, the first national survey was launched on health conditions and the use of the medical services (*Indagine sulle Condizioni di Salute e Ricorso ai Servizi Sanitari*). The surveys on holidays travel and sports were started again in 1982. Family issues were a source of intense public debate. The first survey on *Strutture e Comportamenti Familiari* (Family Structures and Behaviour Survey), which, among other things, tackled the subject of the formation of family units and broadening the interest to solidarity networks, was conducted in 1983 (Sabbadini and De Sandre, 2004). The *Indagine Multiscopo sulle Famiglie* (Multi-purpose Survey on Households) (1987-1991) represents a turning point for statistical information in the social field, because, at least according to the intentions of ISTAT, the move was made from "an information system focusing on the needs of the administration to statistical information focusing greatly on the production of policies aiming to improve social integration and well-being" (ISTAT, 2006, 17).

However, it was only in the 1990s that the information gathering instruments were organised organically thanks to the consolidation of a system of

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<sup>8</sup>Worthy of mention among the many important works on the subject are Henry (1959, 1963, 1966) and Ryder (1964,1965).

large-scale sample surveys of families (ISTAT, 2006, 2009). Through the experimentation of new data collection techniques, particularly telephone and computer-assisted surveys, the Multiscopo surveys (from 1993), the *Indagine sui Consumi delle famiglie* (Household Consumption Survey) (1996), and the *Indagine sulle Forze Lavoro* (Labour Force Survey) (2000-2003) were redesigned. Between 1994 and 2001, the first panel survey was implemented as part of a European project called EHCP (European Community Household Panel), replaced in 2004 by the European Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), which was an annual survey aimed at providing a set of cross-sectional and longitudinal indicators on income, living conditions and social exclusion.

The longitudinal component was also measured in the *Indagine Multiscopo su Famiglie e Soggetti Sociali* (Multi-purpose Survey on Household and Social Subjects), retrospectively reconstructing individual biographies concerning professional and family paths. This survey, carried out for the first time in 1998, was repeated in 2003 and 2009. New questions were added in order to align it with the international project called the “Generations and Gender Programme (GGP)” (Vikat *et al.*, 2007) funded by the United Nations Fund for Population Activity (UNFPA). The longitudinal approach was further highlighted with the addition of a panel survey in February 2007 called *Criticità dei Percorsi Lavorativi in un’Ottica di Genere* (Career Paths in a Gender Perspective). This was a one-off survey which re-interviewed 10,000 people between 18 and 64 years of age who had taken part in the *Famiglia e Soggetti Sociali* survey in November 2003. Although essentially limited to work issues, this second wave represented an important innovation, allowing researchers to validate *a posteriori* the intentions and expectations expressed in 2003 against the behaviour effectively experimented in the following years.

ISTAT also carried out another large-scale sample survey, the *Indagine Campionaria sulle Nascite* (Sample Survey on Births), in 2002 and 2005. This survey provided important and useful information on the issue of work/family reconciliation for women with children. It was designed specifically to fill a gap in the time series related to the birth order due to the suspension in the recording of birth statistics following the Bassanini-bis law of 1998.

Nevertheless, the institutional innovations and progress in the field of statistical information were not limited to the activities of ISTAT. In 1976, after the first World Population Conference (Bucharest, 1974), the *Comitato Nazionale per i Problemi di Popolazione* (National Committee for Population Issues) was established under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, with demographers, ISTAT, representatives of various Ministries and politicians all serving as consultants. Generally speaking, its impact on society was limited. In order to gain the greatest possible scientific consent, the indication of the most serious socio-economic and health problems linked to demographic dynamics was halted (prudently) in the face of the possible political action

implications. Even when views which could be used politically were expressed, such as the proposal for parsimonious planning for the number of teachers in accordance with declining school enrolment, politicians did not give them appropriate consideration. However, it is worth noting that the Committee led to the rebuilding of bridges between the demographic world and the institutions which had been broken after the end of the Second World War (De Sandre, 2005). The activities of the Committee waned progressively during the 1990s.

In 1981, the IRP (Institute for Population Research), within the CNR (National Research Council), was established. In 1983, the IRP performed the first survey on the opinions of Italians concerning couplehood and children, with the aim of investigating the motivations underlying the consolidated trend of the fertility decline (Palomba, 1987). The IRP continued to work intensely during the following years. Although not continuously, it published various editions of its *Rapporti sulla Popolazione* (Population Reports), in some cases attempting to combine the analysis of the main demographic trends with specific public policy proposals.

In the academic world, two surveys were carried out that aimed to reconstruct the life course of a broad sample of Italians in order to examine the interdependencies between various life trajectories (education, work, family and children) and to analyse not only the events but also the duration in specific states (such as still living with parents or being an atypical worker). The first is called *Seconda Indagine Nazionale sulla Fecondità* INF-2 (Second National Fertility Survey) and was carried out in 1995 following the WFS survey. This survey, designed within the Fertility and Family Survey project and supported by the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UN-ECE), aimed at an in-depth investigation of conjugal and reproductive behaviour in order to offer a more effective international comparison of results than had been achieved in the 1980s (De Sandre *et al.*, 1997). Unlike the Inf-1, ISTAT directly supported this survey.

Two years later, the *Indagine Longitudinale sulle Famiglie Italiane* (ILFI) (Italian Longitudinal Household Survey), which extended the measurement of longitudinal data to include not only retrospective but also prospective data, was started<sup>9</sup>. It was a panel survey, with 5 waves conducted in 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003 and 2005.

In order to improve international comparability, two other broad sample surveys were designed to investigate the attitudes, values, beliefs and behavioural models of European populations: the European Social Survey (ESS) and the European Values Study (EVS). The ESS, which began in 2002, is carried out every two years in more than 30 countries and is currently on its sixth wave. The survey represents a veritable reference point for many researchers

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<sup>9</sup>For a presentation of the survey and the main results of the first wave, see Schizzerotto (2002).

and *policy makers* (Cavalli *et al.*, 2010). Unfortunately the Italian participation, supported by the contribution of the CNR, was suspended after the second wave. This is not however, the case for the EVS, in which Italy has taken part in all four waves conducted thus far (the first was in 1981, the last in 2008).

## 7. DISCUSSION

The production of statistical information is never a neutral process. As stated by Alonso and Starr (1987), official statistics do not merely represent a mirror of reality but hypotheses and theories about the nature of society and its social, economic and political implications. Throughout the 150 years of Italian history, the role of statistical information has been focused on the needs of the government, key to political action. This aspect, which was particularly evident during the twenty years of Fascism, was also evident in other periods of Italian history, namely during post-unification the post-war period. Changes in society are often belatedly accepted by official statistics, also because the institutions themselves have difficulty in understanding and selecting the important changes in the dynamics in progress. The inadequacy of the statistical system in understanding the phenomenon or at least attempting to investigate it using a broad spectrum of instruments was particularly evident in the 1960s and 70s in light of the growing international debate on the great transformations of society, the regulatory system and the methods of analysis.

To assess the extent of the delay with which Italy began to investigate demographic dynamics using broad-spectrum tools, consider the fact that the first sample survey carried out in the USA on birth control behaviour dates back to 1938 whereas in Italy, it was carried out only in 1979. In the Italian census, the concept of informal cohabitation was introduced only in 1991 and only in 2001 was information concerning children from previous relationships gathered explicitly and in detail (Corsini *et al.*, 2008). The case of immigration is equally striking. In the late 1980s, when the phenomenon was already considerable (the number of foreign immigrants registered in the censuses between 1981 and 1991 had doubled from 321,000 to 625,000), attention was still focused mainly on emigration. In 1988, the *Seconda Conferenza Nazionale sull'Emigrazione* (Second National Conference on Emigration) was held (the first was held in 1975). In 1989, the representative body of Italian communities abroad called CGIE (*Consiglio Generale degli Italiani all'Estero*) was established. The CGIE was chaired by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and aimed to protect the living conditions of Italians abroad and strengthen ties with the homeland. In the censuses, the questions concerning geographical mobility, measured through the place of residence 5 or 10 years before the interview were introduced only in 1971 when internal migration was already in strong decline.

Two aspects clearly emerge from our analysis of the last 150 years of history of Italian official statistics on population. First, there were (partly inevitable) lags between the changes in behaviours and the beginning of an observational structure able to capture these changes. Second, there was a difficult and slow recovery from this gap which began in the late post-war period and was only narrowed in the past twenty years with the development of a survey system covering a wide variety of subjects (from births to families, the use of time, consumption, health conditions, etc.) and with a wealth of demographic, social and economic information. Currently the Italian National Institute of Statistics is a forerunner in many aspects, aiming to compensate for the remaining information gaps. Over the past few years, ISTAT faced several challenges: an improved distribution and exploitation of existing data through a more efficient system of free micro-data distribution; the large amount of micro-data available for research use which has been disseminated and the formation of several Research Data Centers (Adele); a more efficient communication strategy based first and foremost on a renewed website and the adoption of new statistical information dissemination strategies through new web instruments; the attempt to exploit the available resources through the development of linkage systems between different sources; the development of surveys in as-yet unexplored fields, such as the conditions and social integration of foreigners, the extreme poverty and the use and satisfaction of services. Moreover, the quality of data has also been improved over the last decades through the adoption of good practices and adherence to international recommendations and guidelines.

Taking into account that, with a substantially similar output, resources allocated to ISTAT are roughly equal to the half of those available for the statistical institutes of the other major European countries (ISTAT, 2011), it is clear that the Institute operates very cost-effectively. Despite the financial difficulties, the picture is certainly positive. However, some critical issues remain and there is room for further improvements. First, the delay concerning data distribution times: as the then-director Viviana Egidi underlined, despite the efforts made by the National Institute of Statistics, the promptness of data distribution remains weak (De Sandre and Ongaro, 2000). In the last decade, there were examples where the time lag between the sample survey and the provision of data exceeded 24 months, as in the case of some *Multi-scopo* surveys. Secondly, new fields of research demand increasingly sophisticated, detailed and accurate data. An example is the need for panel data in order to link behaviour to the evolution of expectations see documents produced by the last three Commissions for the Guarantee of Statistical Information reported in Trivellato *et al.* (1995), Schizzerotto *et al.* (2001), Corsini *et al.* (2008). Other examples include the increasing demand for qualitative data in demography; the lack of geo-referenced data; the production of data for the evaluation of public policies or interventions (such as short-range mobility, social expenditure and private healthcare).

Finally, even though in the last years ISTAT has signed a growing number of research agreements and protocols with universities and other research institutes, we hope that collaborations and connections with the academic world will be further strengthened in the future, and also include a peer-review process in the planning of surveys, preparation of questionnaires, selection of research methods, etc.

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