ON SOLIDARITY

Cultural and Political Conditions for the Reform of Social Models in Europe and the U.S.
The impact of immigration and age structure on American society

Looking backward to the future

Charles Hirschman

Introduction

Some years ago, the phrase “demography is destiny” crept into popular discourse, perhaps about the same time that the word “demographics” began to be used to refer to the size and character of the market for television shows and automobiles. However, this phrase, and the assumptions behind it, is not a perspective that is widely shared by demographers. This is not because of any doubts that population composition and processes affect social change, but demographers, as social scientists, see social patterns and trends as more complex and contingent than any mono-causal theory would allow. Population structures and processes can create limits on possibilities and open up new opportunities, much like geography and technological change. These factors may shape history over the centuries, but observing their impact in the shorter run of decades requires consideration of historical contingency.

Looking backward, we can see that the baby boom did not squeeze educational opportunities for the children and youth in the 1950s and 1960s, but rather created pressures for a major expansion of schools and colleges. Crowded classrooms and sharing desks were only short-term outcomes for the rapidly expanding numbers of children in the decades after World War II. Added demand created a political consensus for expanding the supply of schools, classrooms, and teachers.

The twentieth-century revolution that affected more people than any other was the increasing participation of women in the paid labor force. Not only have women’s lives been transformed, but so have child rearing and family life more generally. While the emancipation of women from purely domestic lives did follow on the heels of the decline of fertility, the linkage was far from straightforward. The demographic transition may have provided new possibilities, but the pathways to

1 This paper was completed while the author was a Bixby Visiting Scholar at the Population Reference Bureau in Washington, D.C.

2 A search for “demography is destiny” produced 23,700 hits on Google, which suggests widespread popular use of the phrase. A search for the same phrase on JSTOR (scholarly journals including 10 population journals) produced just 10 hits and only one from a demographic publication that rejected the premise. The exact quote from the demographic journal was: “Though our field has great strength and breadth, due modesty must keep us from asserting that demography is destiny” (Hermalin 1993: 516). Search conducted on April 21, 2006.
new economic, social, and political roles for women were neither linear nor predicted.

With this awareness of the folly of predicting short-run social change from demographic trends, this essay examines the potential impact of immigration and population aging on the future of American society and industrial societies more generally. Much of this essay looks backward, rather than forward. The past is not only more brightly lit than the future, but the lessons learned from a study of the past provide some wisdom and, more importantly, humility for those who wish to anticipate and change the future. Policy makers, social commentators, and even scholars have repeatedly misunderstood the long-term implications of contemporaneous demographic trends. The twenty-first century is unlikely to be easier to anticipate or to understand than was the twentieth.

Immigration and American society during the twentieth century

The United States is widely considered to be a nation of immigrants, but the common assumption is that immigrants have generally assimilated to a core American society and culture defined by a founding population that created the republic in the late eighteenth century. The reality is that American culture, as well as almost every aspect of social, economic, and political development of the United States, has been modified — if not transformed — by waves of immigration over the last two centuries (Handlin 1973, Hirschman 2005). Even the idea of what it means to be an American has evolved as each immigrant wave has broadened the outlook of all Americans. An awareness of this history can help to inform the contemporary debate over the significance of current and future immigration.

The first way to assess the impact of immigration is through population numbers, though there are many ways to view the demographic prism. Almost seventy million immigrants have arrived since the federal government began counting in 1820 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2006: 8). Although some level of immigration has been continuous throughout American history, there have been two epochal periods: the 1880 to 1924 age of mass migration, primarily from southern and eastern Europe, and the post-1965 wave of immigration, primarily from Latin America and Asia (Min 2002, Portes and Rumbaut 1996). Each of these eras added more than twenty-five million immigrants, and the current wave is far from finished. During some of the peak years of immigration in the early 1900s, about one million immigrants arrived annually, which was more than one percent of the total U.S. population at the time. In the early twenty-first century, there have been a few years with more than one million legal immigrants, but with a total U.S. population of almost three hundred million, the relative impact is much less than it was in the early years of the twentieth century.

In recent years immigration has comprised about 40 percent of population growth in the United States and, if the native-born children of immigrants are included, the proportion is even higher (Kent and Mather 2002). This figure is so high primarily
because natural increase is so low. American fertility patterns have been about equal to, or even below, the replacement level, for the last quarter of the twentieth-century. Without a favorable age structure, natural increase would be close to zero, and immigration would be the only source of population growth.

Another lens through which to evaluate the demographic impact of immigration is the national origins of the contemporary American population, especially those who are immigrants and those who are considered to be (or consider themselves) descendents of recent immigrants. Of course, all Americans with the exception of American Indians are the descendents of immigrants. But some Americans, particularly those of English origin whose ancestors arrived prior to the American Revolution, have considered themselves to be the "native stock" of the American population (Baltzell 1964). Although this claim may seem quaint today, the view was taken very seriously in the early decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, the immigration restrictions of the 1920s were calibrated to preserving the historic "national origins" of the American population (Higham 1988).

The American population has, however, always been much more diverse than the Anglo-centric image of the eighteenth century. The first American census in 1790, shortly after the formation of the United States, counted a bit less than four million people, of whom at least 20 percent were of African descent (Gibson and Jung 2002). The estimates of the non-English-origin population in 1790 range from 20 to 40 percent (Akenson 1984; McDonald and McDonald 1980; and Purvis 1984). There are no official figures on the numbers of American Indians prior to the late nineteenth century, but they were the dominant population of the eighteenth century in most of the territories that eventually became the United States. Almost all African-Americans are the descendents of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century settlers, while the majority of white Americans are descendents of immigrants who arrived in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries (Gibson 1992: 165; Edmonston and Passell 1994: 61). Most Americans have acquired a sense of historical continuity from America's founding, but this is primarily the result of socialization and education, not descent.

Each new wave of immigration to the United States has met with some degree of hostility and fear from longer-term residents that immigrants will harm American society or will not conform to the prevailing American way of life. In 1751, Benjamin Franklin complained about the "Palatine Boors" who were trying to Germanize Pennsylvania and refused to learn English (Archdeacon 1983: 20). Throughout the nineteenth century, Irish- and German-Americans, especially Catholics, were not considered to be fully American by old-stock Americans in terms of culture or status. In May 1844, there were three days of rioting in Kensington, an Irish suburb of Philadelphia, which culminated in the burning of two Catholic churches and other property (Archdeacon 1983: 81). This case was one incident of many during the 1840s and 1850s — the heyday of the "Know-Nothing Movement" — when Catholic churches and convents were destroyed and priests were attacked by Protestant mobs (Daniels 1991: 267–268).
The hostility of old-line Americans to “foreigners” accelerated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\(^3\) Perhaps the most important force moving the United States toward limits on immigration was the rising tide of nativism — the fear of foreigners, which gradually became intertwined with racial ideology in the first two decades of the twentieth century. American nativism had deep roots in anti-Catholicism and a fear of foreign radicals, but the belief in the inherent superiority of the Anglo-Saxon “race” became the dominant element of the ideology in the late nineteenth century (Higham 1988: Chapter 1). These beliefs and the link to immigration restriction had widespread support among many well-educated elites. The Immigration Restriction League, founded by young Harvard-educated Boston Brahmins in 1894, advocated a literacy test to slow the tide of immigration (Bernard 1980: 492). It was thought that a literacy test would reduce immigration from southern and eastern Europe, which was sending an “alarming number of illiterates, paupers, criminals, and madmen who endangered American character and citizenship” (Higham 1988: 103).

Cities, where most immigrants settled, were derided and feared as places filled with dangerous people and radical ideas (Hawley 1972: 521). These sentiments were often formulated by intellectuals, but they resonated with many white Americans who were reared in rather parochial and homogenous rural and small town environments. While some reformers, such as Jane Addams, went to work to alleviate the many problems of urban slums, others such as Henry Adams, the descedant of two American presidents and a noted man of letters, expressed virulent nativism and anti-Semitism (Baltzell 1964: 111). Henry Ford, who as much as anyone created the American automobile age, “looked upon big cities as cesspools of iniquity, soulless, and artificial” (Higham 1988: 283). Through his general magazine, the Dearborn Independent, Henry Ford spread his hatred of the “international Jewish conspiracy” to a mass audience during the 1920s.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first step toward a closed society. From the 1880s to the 1920s, a diverse set of groups, ranging from the old-line New England elites to the Progressive Movement in the Midwest to the Ku Klux Klan led a campaign to halt immigration from undesirable immigrants from Europe (Higham 1988; Jones 1992: chap.9). In the early decades of the twentieth century the nascent pseudoscience of eugenics was used to support claims of the inferiority of the new immigrants relative to old-stock Americans. Passing the national origins quotas in the early 1920s was intended to exclude everyone from Asia and Africa and to sharply lower the numbers of arrivals from southern and eastern Europe.

The magnitude and character of the latest wave of immigration to the United States, popularly known as the “post-1965 wave of immigration” was a surprise to policy makers and many experts. The 1965 amendments to the Immigration and

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\(^3\) The rise of the Ku Klux Klan and the spread of lynching and Jim Crow segregation of African Americans occurred at about the same time.
Nationality Act, also known as the Hart-Cellar Act, repealed the national origin quotas enacted in the 1920s. Leading the immigration reform movement were the children and grandchildren of southern and eastern European immigrants who considered the 1920s restrictions to be discriminatory. The advocates of reform in the 1960s were not pushing for a major new wave of immigration. Their expectation was that there would be a small increase of arrivals from Italy, Greece, and a few other European countries as families that were divided by the immigration restrictions of the 1920s were allowed to be reunited, but that no long-term increase would result (Reimers 1985: chap. 3).

The new criteria for admission under the 1965 Act were family reunification and scarce occupational skills (Keely 1979). The new preference system allowed highly skilled professionals — primarily doctors, nurses, and engineers from Asian countries — to immigrate and eventually to sponsor their families. About the same time, and largely independently of the 1965 Immigration Act, immigration from Latin America began to rise. Legal and undocumented migration from Mexico surged after a temporary farm-worker program known as the Bracero Program was shut down in 1964 (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). Migration from Cuba arose from the tumult of Fidel Castro’s revolution, as first elites and then professional and middle-class families fled persecution and the imposition of socialism in the 1960s and 1970s. Beginning in the 1970s, there were several waves of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong refugees following the collapse of American supported regimes in Southeast Asia. Then in the 1980s, there were new refugees from Central American nations such as Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala (Lundquist and Massey 2005).

Each of these streams of immigration, as well as refugee inflows, has spawned secondary waves of immigration as family members followed. By 2000, there were over thirty million foreign born persons in the United States, of whom almost one-third arrived in the prior decade. Adding together immigrants and their children (the second generation), more than sixty million people, or one in five Americans, have recent roots from other countries (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2005). Although the current levels of immigration are not equal — in relative terms — to the Age of Mass Migration in the early twentieth century, the absolute numbers of contemporary immigrants far exceed that of any prior time in American history or the experience of any other country.

American history cannot be separated from the history of immigration. Or as Handlin (1973:3) put it “immigrants were American history.” During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, immigrants from Germany and Scandinavia played a major role in settling the frontier. Irish immigrants worked as laborers in cities and were the major source of labor in the construction of transportation networks including canals, railroads, and roads. Some have estimated that the manpower advantage of the Union forces during the Civil War was largely due to immigrants who had settled in the northern states (Gallman 1977: 31).
Immigrants have also played an important role in the transition to an urban industrial economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Immigrant workers have always been overrepresented in skilled trades, mining, and as peddlers, merchants, and laborers in urban areas. Immigrants and their children were the majority of workers in the garment sweatshops of New York, the coalfields of Pennsylvania, and the stockyards of Chicago. The cities of America during the age of industrialization were primarily immigrant cities (Gibson and Jung 2006). The rapidly expanding industrial economy of the North and Midwest drew disproportionately on immigrant labor from 1880 to 1920 and then on African-American workers from the South from 1920 to 1950. In 1900, about three-quarters of the populations of many large cities were composed of immigrants and their children, including New York, Chicago, Boston, Cleveland, San Francisco, Buffalo, Milwaukee, and Detroit (Carpenter, 1927: 27). Immigrants and their children remained the majority of the urban population, especially in the industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest until the 1920s (Carpenter, 1927: 27; Eldridge and Thomas 1964: 206–209).

Immigrants and their children have also played an important role in modern American politics. They played an important role in forming the Roosevelt coalition in the 1930s and again in the 1960s with the election of John F. Kennedy. The seeds of the 1932 Roosevelt coalition were established in 1928, when Al Smith, an Irish-American (on his mother's side) Catholic from New York City, attracted the immigrant urban vote to the Democratic Party. Although Herbert Hoover defeated Al Smith in 1928, a number of scholars have attributed the shift from the Republican dominance of the government in the 1920s to the New Deal coalition of the 1930s to the increasing share, turnout, and partisanship of the urban ethnic vote following several decades of mass immigration (Andersen 1979: 67–69; Baltzell 1964: 230; Clubb and Allen 1969; Degler 1964; Lubell 1952: 28).

Although the age of mass immigration had ended in the 1920s, the children of immigrants formed 20 percent of the potential electorate in 1960 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1965: 8). The political leanings of the second generation can be inferred from research on the relationship between religion and political preferences. In the decades following the World War II era, white Protestants, and especially middle-class white Protestants outside the South, have been the base of the Republican Party, while Catholic and Jewish voters have been disproportionately Democratic (Hamilton 1972: chap. 5). The majority of early twentieth century southern and eastern European immigrants were Catholic or Jewish (Foner 2000: 11; Jones 1992: 192–95). The reform periods of the New Deal of the 1930s and the New Frontier (which lead to the Great Society programs of Lyndon Johnson) were made possible by the mass migration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Immigrants and their descendants were also important in the development of popular American culture and in creating the positive image of immigration in the American mind. Immigrants and the second generation have played a remarkable
role in the American creative arts, including writing, directing, producing, and acting in American films and plays for most of the first half of the twentieth century (Buhle 2004; Gabler 1988; Most 2004; Phillips 1998; Winokur 1996). The majority of Hollywood film directors who have won two or more Academy Awards (Oscars) were either immigrants or the children of immigrants (Hirschman 2005: Table 4). Many of the most highly regarded composers and playwrights on Broadway were the children of immigrants, including George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Jerome Kern, Harold Arlen, and Leonard Bernstein (Most 2004). These composers and lyricists, who wrote much of the standard American songbook, were largely second- and third-generation Jewish immigrants who were reared in ethnic enclaves, but their music has defined the quintessential American musical culture of the twentieth century.

Although first- and second-generation immigrant artists have always been anxious to assimilate into American society and to adopt “Anglo-sounding” names (Baltzell 1964), they have also broadened American culture to make it more receptive and open to outsiders. The Hollywood theme “that anyone can make it in America” is an Americanized version of the rags to riches story — one that is appealing to people who are striving for upward mobility. Many Hollywood and Broadway productions have also given us poignant accounts of outsiders who struggle to be understood and accepted. Perhaps it is not so surprising that the Statue of Liberty has become the preeminent national symbol of the United States (Kasinitz 2004: 279).

**Age structure and fortune in America during the twentieth century**

The aging population in the United States in the twenty-first century — and in other industrial societies — has few historical precedents. In 2000, a little more than 12 percent of the American population was over sixty-five, but this figure is projected to rise to 20 percent by 2050 (He et al. 2005: 13), about the level of many European countries today. By mid-century (2050), more than one-third of the populations of most European countries will be above age sixty-five.

In a population closed to migration, fertility has a much greater impact on age structure than mortality (Coale 1964, 1972). This is because births are concentrated at age zero, while deaths are distributed at all ages. Reductions in infant and child mortality (which has been the largest component of twentieth-century mortality decline) actually lead to a more youthful age structure. Very low levels of fertility are the primary reason for the much older age structures in Europe relative the United States. Since fertility is already at very low levels in the United States and other industrial countries, mortality changes will probably have a somewhat greater impact on age structure in the coming years. Mortality rates are already very low at younger ages, and further significant reductions will be more difficult to achieve. There is still considerable room, however, for substantial reductions in morality rates at middle and older ages though improvements in
treatment, diagnosis, and prevention of chronic conditions and diseases. Reductions in mortality at older ages will gradually increase the proportion of elderly in the population.

In 1900, the population pyramid (age structure) of the United States resembled that of many contemporary developing counties with a wide base and sharply tapered sides representing the combination of high fertility and high mortality. The median age of the population was twenty-three and more than one-third of the population was below age fifteen (Hobbs and Stoops 2002: Ch. 2). Immigration increased the proportion of the population in the working ages. Most immigrants arrive when they are in their young working ages — from their late teens to early thirties (Carter and Sutch 1988). There are also some very young — and older — immigrants who come as family dependents, but the bulk of immigrants are in the prime working ages.

There have been dramatic changes in the age structure of the American population over the twentieth century, primarily as a result of fluctuations in the birth rate. Over the first half of the twentieth century, fertility and mortality declined dramatically, and immigration slowed to a trickle after the mid-1920s. By 1950, the median age had risen to thirty and only about one-quarter of the population was below age fifteen. The proportion of the population above age sixty-five remained in the single digits, but doubled from 4 percent in 1900 to 8 percent in 1950. A significant share of the elderly, about one-third, was foreign born (He 2002: 1). In the middle decades of the twentieth century, the foreign born were disproportionately the elderly survivors from the era of mass immigration.

The post World War II baby boom was one of the most surprising events of the century. There is generally a recovery in fertility after a major war because marriages and childbearing are postponed with the mobilization of large numbers of young men and women into the military. This happened after World War I, and demographers predicted a temporary rise in fertility for two or three years after World War II. The post-World War II baby boom, however, lasted for almost twenty years from 1946 to the mid-1960s (Hughes and O’Rand 2004). Then fertility rates began to decline slowly in the mid-1960s and then more rapidly in the early 1970s. By the middle of the 1970s, American fertility patterns were below two children per woman (the number needed to replace the parental generation) and have remained there, albeit with small fluctuations, for the next thirty years. During the baby-boom era of the 1950s and 1960s, the American age structure became younger with a decline in median age and significant increases in the proportions of children and the school-age population.

It is much easier to describe the demographic components of the baby boom and the subsequent “birth dearth” than to explain their origins and socioeconomic consequences. The popular interpretation of American fertility trends has

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4 This figure is for 1960, but it was approximately the same in 1950.
emphasized cultural values and family ideals. According to this perspective, there was a return to the traditional family system that had been interrupted by the hard times of the Great Depression and the mobilization of men and women during World War II. Couples who had married before the war sought to “make up” for births that had been postponed. With the return to normality, young adults wanted to marry and start their families.

The observed patterns of marriage and fertility from the late 1940s and 1950s are consistent with this interpretation. During the 1950s, record numbers of young adults married and had at least two children. The changes in family values in the late 1960s and subsequent postponement of marriage and decline of fertility in the 1970s and 1980s are more difficult to explain from a cultural interpretation. The availability of the birth-control pill (and other reliable forms of contraception) and the social movements of the 1960s may have changed traditional values because sexual behavior outside of marriage no longer carried the risks (of premarital pregnancy) and stigma faced from it by earlier generations of young adults. The rise of divorce and women’s participation in the labor force may have made traditional gender roles less attractive to many young women and men.

An alternative socioeconomic theory (the “relative income hypothesis”) has been proposed by Richard Easterlin (Pampel 1978, Peters 1995). Easterlin argues that one aspect of age structure — the shares of younger and older men in the population — is the driving force that has shaped fertility trends and many other economic outcomes in the post-World War II era. The central idea is that a tight labor market for young men raises their wages and leads to a variety of positive outcomes throughout their careers. The most dramatic example is the favorable situation of baby boom parents who came of age in the 1950s. This cohort, which was born in the 1930s, was smaller than earlier cohorts and young men in it experienced socioeconomic mobility and higher incomes than they expected (expectations are shaped by the living standards of their parents). The good times fostered earlier and almost universal marriage, higher fertility (the baby boom), and positive career benefits.

Easterlin predicted the opposite outcomes for the baby boom cohorts, who came of age in the 1970s. According to Easterlin, the baby boom cohorts would encounter poorer economic prospects relative to their expectations that were shaped by the good times of the 1950s and 1960s. Since young men in the 1970s were less able to support a family without a working spouse, they postponed marriage, and had fewer children. Younger unmarried women invested more in their careers and continued to work after marriage. Easterlin predicted future oscillations in the labor market and in family formation in response to shifts in the age structure.

Both the cultural interpretation and Easterlin’s relative income hypothesis are consistent with experiences of the 1950s and 1960s, but neither seems to have fully captured the developments of the last few decades of the twentieth century. Almost by definition, cultural theories offer little guidance for social change.
Easterlin’s theory is more consistent with the economic rebound and slight rise in fertility in the 1990s, but family life in the 1990s did not return to the model of the 1950s.

Intensive studies of the socioeconomic trajectories of cohorts in the late twentieth century show much more complexity and varied outcomes than would be predicted by a tight relationship between demographic characteristics and other outcomes (Hughes and O’Rand 2004, Myers 2004). There appears to have been continued progress for successive cohorts of young adults with each generation receiving more education than earlier cohorts. This is also true for occupations and incomes, but with some qualifications. The gains may have slowed down for recent generations and there may have been a small decline in occupational attainment for the late baby boomers (those born in the late 1950s and early 1960s). There has also been widening wage inequality for baby boomers, especially the late baby boomers. Home ownership was lower for the baby boom cohorts in the 1980s than it was for earlier generations at the same time in their careers, but the gap appeared to have narrowed by 2000 (Myers 2004: 21).

Increasing immigration has made it more difficult to trace the path of generational progress. In the 1950s and 1960s, only about one in twenty of young adults was an immigrant, but by 2000, the figure had risen to about one in six. Since immigrants, on average, have lower socioeconomic attainments than the native-born, intercohort trends are clouded by compositional change. This is particularly true for Latinos and Asian Americans — the majority of young adults in these groups are immigrants.

Perhaps the most surprising demographic trend of the late twentieth century is the rising status of the elderly in American society. One-third of the sixty-five to seventy-four year olds was classified as poor in 1960 compared to only 5 percent in 2000 (Myers 2004: 13). As poverty rates for the elderly have plummeted, children have become the demographic group most vulnerable to poverty. The outcomes are the direct result of public policy, not demographic pressures. Social security was indexed to wage inflation in the 1970s and has protected the elderly from poverty, while Medicare has provided a guarantee of access to health care. Except for schooling, there have been no comparable programs for children, and the situation of children has worsened as the fraction of low-income, single parent families has increased (Preston 1984).

The situation of the elderly has also improved because recent cohorts entering the ranks of the elderly have had more education, higher incomes, and better health than earlier cohorts. Other studies have shown that the declining rates of disability among the elderly can be attributed, in part, to lower rates of disease and injury experience during childhood by more recent cohorts.
Lessons from twentieth century demographic trends

From our current vantage point, it is clear that the major demographic trends that shaped twentieth-century American society were not anticipated nor understood by contemporary observers.

In the early twentieth century, most elites and many social scientists thought that immigrants were overrunning American society. Based on the prevailing theories of the time (social Darwinism and eugenics), immigrants were thought to be culturally and "racially inferior" to old-stock Americans. The arguments used to restrict continued southern and eastern European immigration in the twentieth century paralleled those made earlier to end Chinese and Japanese immigration (in 1882 and 1907, respectively). For three decades, the battle over immigration restriction was waged in the court of public opinion and in Congress. In 1910, the Dillingham Commission (a congressionally appointed commission named after Senator William P. Dillingham of Vermont) issued a forty-two-volume report, which assumed the racial inferiority of the new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe relative to the old-stock immigrants from northwestern Europe (Bernard 1980: 492).

Social Darwinism and scientific racism were in full flower with many leading scholars warning against allowing further immigration of "beaten members of beaten breeds" (Jones 1992: 228–230). When the passage of a literacy test in 1917 did not have the intended impact of slowing immigration from southern and eastern Europe, Congress passed the Quota Act in 1921 to limit the number of annual immigrants from each country to 3 percent of the foreign born of that nationality in the 1910 Census (Bernard, 1980: 492–493). These provisions were not strong enough for some restrictionists, who passed another immigration law in 1924 that pushed the quotas back to 2 percent of each nationality counted in the 1890 census — a date before the bulk of the new immigrants had arrived.

Looking backward, we can see that the impacts of the Age of Mass Migration from 1880 to 1924 were almost entirely the opposite of those anticipated by contemporary observers. Based on standard measures of socioeconomic achievement, residential location, and intermarriage, the children and grandchildren of the "new immigrants" of the early twentieth century have almost completely assimilated into American society (Alba and Nee 2003). Even groups such as Italian-Americans that were considered to be a "community in distress" as late as the 1930s, have blended into the American mosaic. A closer examination reveals that the "new immigrants" have remade American society in their image. The Anglo-centric core of the early twentieth century has been largely replaced with a more cosmopolitan America that places Catholicism and Judaism on a par with Protestant denominations. Perhaps, the most important legacy of the Age of Mass Immigration is that the children of eastern and southern immigrants helped to pave the way for the New Deal of the 1930s, the Great Society of the 1960s, and
the 1965 Immigration Act, which allowed a new wave of immigration from Asia and Latin America to arrive.

In the early post-World War II years, the expert opinion was that high fertility would be a temporary phenomenon lasting only a few years as postponed births were "made up." The American baby boom, however, lasted almost two decades. Although the causes of the baby boom are still debated, the relative prosperity of the 1950s combined with traditional gender roles appear to have fostered a new demographic regime of almost universal marriage and moderate size families of two to four children. There was a continued decline of large families during the baby-boom era as demographic theory would have predicted, but nonmarriage, childlessness, and one-child families also declined. The 1950s were not a simple return to tradition, but a different society that encouraged conformity to an idealized family structure.

In the 1960s, it was popular to project the baby-boom cohorts as a threat to social stability and future economic well-being. Baby boomers were expected to crowd schools and colleges and then exert disproportionate influence on society with their exaggerated sense of self-importance and participatory politics. Their large numbers were also expected to drive up the costs of housing and drive down wages as they passed through their family formation and working careers. And now baby boomers are projected to wreak havoc on pension programs in the twenty-first century as they enter the retirement years. Although selected images and some data can be found in support of these conjectures, careful studies of cohort trends show a much more nuanced pattern of social change.

Schools and classrooms were indeed crowded in the early 1950s, but local and state governments responded with expansion of public schools — primarily in new suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s — and then a major expansion of college and university enrollments continued to accommodate the baby boomers in the 1960s and 1970s. The baby boomers were the best-educated generation in American history, only exceeded by subsequent generations. Labor markets also responded to the increasing availability of workers, both of young men and women — and also of older women and immigrants — with the creation of millions of new jobs in public services (health care, education), commerce, business, and personal services. Even as the agricultural sector continued to disappear and manufacturing retrenched, overall employment, with a few exceptions, has kept pace with population growth. Although individual wage growth has slowed, the increase in two worker households has increased average per capita family income during the last three decades of the twentieth century.

There have been major changes in family life, with divorce and cohabitation becoming normative experiences. The majority of children experience a one-parent family at some point during their childhood or adolescence, and children who live in single-parent families are particularly prone to poverty. These trends, however, predate the baby-boomer cohorts, and seem to be part of long-term secular trends rather than ones stimulated by shifts in the age structure.
The main problem with models that predict societal trends based on demographic projections is the assumption that social, cultural, and political institutions are static. Societies and individuals respond to demographic shifts though changes in market prices and other incentives as well as through popular coalitions who mobilize to pursue their collective interests. Changes are neither automatic nor painless, and there are always many more potential responses that could have happened, but didn’t.

In his recent novel, The Plot Against America, Philip Roth poses the possibility that Charles Lindberg might have been elected president in 1940, and then established a cordial understanding with Nazi Germany. There was certainly virulent anti-Semitism in the United States at the time, and the hatred of Franklin Roosevelt by the WASP upper class could have led to elite support for a fascist alternative. However, as we look back to the 1930s, it appears that Jews and Catholics were “protected,” at least to some degree, by their alliance with many other segments of American society as part of the New Deal coalition. Ironically, the closure of the door to immigration after 1924 and the Great Migration of African-Americans from the rural South to cities in the North and Midwest may have helped the children of southern and eastern European immigrants up the socioeconomic ladder in the middle decades of the twentieth century (Lieberson 1980). All of these groups remained in the Democratic Party well into the 1960s, and this unusually broad base discouraged political alliances based on race and nationality alone. The examples of the Dixiecrats of 1948, George Wallace in 1968, and the Southern Strategy of 1972, show that American politics are not immune to appeals to the “race card.” Historical contingency, as well as demographic trends play a major role in shaping history.

During the 1970s — at least that part of the 1970s that was rooted in the 1960s — it seemed as if the social movements of the era, including those of students, feminists, race/ethnic minorities, and other groups were the wave of the future. It was not clear how much the political protests were driven by demographic trends, but the baby boom, the postponement of marriage and fertility, and regional migration (to the West) were all implicated as potential causes. Then, without any formal announcement, protest movements moved off center stage in the 1980s and 1990s. They did not disappear, and indeed, social movements have become part of normal American politics, but they are less visible and probably attract fewer followers than before. What happened to change demographic destiny?

Sidney Tarrow (1998) and other scholars have argued that the success of political reform reduced support for political protests. The Vietnam War finally ended, universities and colleges provided more social freedoms and curricular choices, professional schools and traditional male careers opened up to women, and American culture became more open to innovation and diversity. These reforms occurred, at least in part, to generational succession. Institutional power passed to new generations, who were more receptive to the demands for change.
The problem for societal models that project the future based on the past is that institutions and culture do respond to pressures and opportunities. The most important idea in the biological sciences is the theory of evolutionary responses to environmental change. Most genetic variations are not adaptive, but some are and these few have shaped the origin and spread of new species in different ecosystems. Human societies also evolve in response to environmental and demographic pressures with changes in technology, organization, and culture. Many, perhaps most, societal changes are maladaptive because they respond in ways to preserve the past rather than to adapt to new conditions. However, some societal responses do respond to pressures in "adaptive" ways that allow for progress of political and economic institutions as well as of communities and families. The differences between adaptive and maladaptive responses may only be clear in retrospect.

Looking to the future

The demographic challenges of twenty-first-century America are not unique to one society. Immigration, like race, seems to be a continuing source of tension in many societies around the globe. Population aging will be fairly modest in the United States until after 2010. Indeed, population aging is far more advanced in most European countries, and is moving faster in Japan. Immigration, especially clandestine immigration, is higher in the United States than in most other industrial countries, but the underlying dynamics are common to almost all industrial societies (Hirschman 2001).

Recent legal immigration to the United States has fluctuated from 700,000 to 1,000,000 new permanent residents a year, but with an upward drift that is evident from a decadal perspective (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2006). Only about one-half of legal immigrants are new arrivals to the country. The other half consists of adjustments of current residents who were able to obtain an immigrant visa because of change in employment or family status. Many refugees are eventually able to obtain permanent resident immigrant visas. There is also a large, but unknown number of undocumented (illegal) immigrants, perhaps upwards of 300,000 per year entering the country.

The major policy discussion in the United States (and elsewhere) is focused on immigration control. There is wide agreement that clandestine immigration should be stopped and legal immigration should be tightly controlled. There are arguments over the numbers and types of immigrants to be admitted, but the idea that sovereign states can, and should, control population movements across borders is virtually unchallenged. However, there is a considerable body of research that shows the motivations for international migration are huge and the rewards to migrants, employers, and societies (both sending and receiving) are enormous (Massey 1999). These forces suggest that public policies of immigration control are unlikely to be successful.
The mass media routinely report the extraordinary investments and ingenuity of Latin Americans, Chinese, and Africans who are seeking to migrate to North America and Europe. Many of these efforts lead to capture and humiliating treatment as criminals. In other instances, many migrants die when they are locked into shipping containers or attempt to traverse the deserts without sufficient water and other provisions. Yet they continue to come. The simple reason is that the economies of the South and North are increasingly integrated through flows of goods, capital, and labor. International migration is a functional component of modern societies, rich and poor, that resolves the uneven distribution of people and opportunities.

Most migrants come, not to settle, but to support their families at home (Massey et al. 2002). Indeed the remittances from international migrants to their home developing countries far exceed the funds going to poor countries from foreign aid, direct capital investment, and from manufacturing exports (Massey et al. 1998). The gains of international migration to the economies of advanced countries are also substantial. Most industrial economies do not have sufficient domestic supplies of low-cost labor. If this pattern were found in only one country or in only a few sectors, then it might be possible to consider a fairly narrow explanation in terms of political cultures or market rigidities. The demand for “cheaper immigrant labor”, however, spans many sectors (agriculture, manufacturing, construction, repair services, restaurants, and child care) in most industrial countries, including a number of rapidly growing developing countries.

The demand for immigrant labor is not restricted to unskilled manual labor. The United States and other industrial countries have encountered a shortage of scientific and engineering workers, particularly in the high-tech sector. This demand has been met, in part, by allowing many talented foreign students in American universities to convert their student visas to immigrant status. In spite of political pressures to control immigration, almost all policy changes have broadened the scope of legal immigration to allow settlement by refugees, agricultural workers, “illegal” immigrants with long residencies in the country; peoples in countries that have too few American citizen relatives to sponsor them, and workers in high demand by U.S. employers.

Standard economic theory posits that domestic migration is a functional response to wage differentials between areas. Migration allows for workers to benefit from higher wages in growing areas and stimulates the economy to operate more efficiently by creating larger and more porous labor and consumer markets. Indeed the logic for lessening barriers to migration is similar to that of international free trade. Economic theory suggests that all countries benefit from the free flow of capital, goods, and technology across international borders. International migration is often excluded from discussions about expanding international trade (such as in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) debate), largely because of political considerations rather than economic theory.
My reading of current trends and history suggests that the major policy issue for international migration is not immigration control, but the creation of opportunities for the socioeconomic advancement and social integration of immigrants and their descendants. Immigrants will continue to come in large numbers for the foreseeable future. If the borders are closed, they are likely to find clandestine ways of entry — the economic incentives of both the sending and receiving societies are overwhelming. However, it is an open question whether the immigrants will be accepted as full members of the receiving society. American society, even with all of its failings, may offer a model of how immigrants and their children have been successfully incorporated.

Population aging is already causing major economic and social strains in many industrial countries, and the United States will also encounter them beginning in 2010. Over the last fifteen years, a number of excellent demographic studies by Ronald Lee (Lee 2000, Lee and Miller 2000, Lee and Tuljapurkar 1997, Samuel Preston 1993 and John Bongaarts 2004) have analyzed the relationship between population aging and public pay-as-you-go pension programs. The results of these vary, but only in degree. Lee and Tuljapurkar (1997) estimate that Social Security taxes might have to double from 2000 to 2050, while Bongaarts (2004) concludes that current public pension programs in much of Europe are unsustainable. There are a small number of variables that affect the public programs of economic transfers from the working-age population to the dependent elderly: age structure (the relative size of the working age and elderly populations), the labor-force participation rate of the working age population, the age at retirement (or eligibility), the tax rates paid by the working population, and the benefits paid to the dependent elderly. The projected changes in the age structure over the next fifty years have implications for the other elements in the intergenerational income transfer system. If no changes are made in the levels of benefits or the average age of retirement, the increases in tax rates on the working population are likely to squeeze all other public-sector expenditures.

The other major implication of population aging is on medical costs. Modern medicine has been remarkably successful in reducing mortality and morbidity through improvements in diagnosis and treatment. In most cases, these successful interventions are very expensive because of the costs of development (research laboratories), capital equipment (scanning and other equipment), and the relatively high salaries of skilled health care workers. Since the elderly tend to have more chronic conditions than younger people, the average per capita cost of modern medicine (tax rates on workers) will tend to rise with population aging.

There are some policies that might slow population aging. Some countries have tried to increase fertility through subsidies to families with children and more generous maternity leave programs. President Putin has recently proposed a major program of government incentives for increasing the birth rate in Russia. Although such policies might have minor effects (Scandinavian countries with more family friendly policies have somewhat higher birth rates than many other
European countries), low fertility is a characteristic feature of modern urban industrial societies and is unlikely to change.

Immigration also works to slow population aging since migrants are concentrated in the working and family formation ages. And since some immigrants return to their homelands after retirement, they may not be claimants for pensions and health care during their old age. However, immigration is only a partial (and temporary) solution to population aging. The volume of immigration necessary to keep a constant age structure is much larger than current or past periods of mass immigration (Espenshade 1994, United Nations 2000).

The projected population-aging crisis is often thought to be intractable because of political interests. As the elderly become a larger share of the population (electorate), their influence on democratic politics will increase. If the past is any guide, the elderly (and those approaching the retirement years) tend to be more politically active, informed, and self-interested than most other groups. They are likely to be opposed to decreases in pension benefits or to proposals to raise the retirement age. Although almost all public pension programs are funded by taxes on the working population, most retirees believe that they are entitled to their pensions based on taxes paid into the retirement system throughout their working career.

Just as demographic research has forecast the impending crisis of population aging, perhaps a closer examination of the demographic status of the elderly might point to some potentially positive scenarios. The presence of a relatively well-educated, prosperous, and healthy retired population could be an important societal resource. Many elderly, especially the oldest of the old, may be relatively inactive while other elderly may be more interested in leisure pursuits than volunteer service. However, even if only a relatively small fraction of the active retired persons in their sixties and seventies could be persuaded to help in schools, community organizations, and charitable programs, they could make an important difference. The rising labor-force participation of women has depleted the ranks of volunteers in many communities and created a huge demand for after-school programs for children. The growing numbers of elderly in society will increase economic pressures on Social Security and medical services, but it may also create a new opportunity and resource for societies with the wisdom to appreciate the potential of "elder-power".

This new opportunity would probably have to be accompanied with a redefinition of the intergenerational compact. In most traditional societies, the family is the primary institution for the transfer of food and other resources (including care) from adults in the prime working ages to dependent children and older persons. These transfers are motivated by affection, but also by interdependence and reciprocity. Adults generally feel an obligation to support older family members who cared for them in an earlier stage of life. In most traditional societies, one of the primary motivations to have children is as an "investment" for old-age security.
In modern societies, families are smaller, more dispersed, and less able to cover all the risks and needs of children and the elderly. But the most important feature of modern societies is that the intergenerational compact is broadened from the family to the society. Individuals still have a primary obligation to care for their own children and parents (and other family dependents), but there is also a recognition that generations have obligations to each other within the community and the society as a whole. For example, the education of all children (not just one’s own) provides for future economic growth, social stability, and public enlightenment. The full costs of schooling for an individual child would be beyond the reach of most parents (the costs of private schooling approximates the actual price of education), but a fairly modest tax from all workers (or all property owners) generally covers the cost of public education for all children.

The care of the elderly, beyond one’s immediate family, is also a part of the intergenerational compact in modern societies. Indeed, the primary pillar of the welfare states has been to provide essential services and economic security to those most in need — the dependent elderly and families who have lost their primary breadwinner. In order to win popular support, these programs are often “sold” as individual savings programs that have been more politically palatable than a redistributive program. In reality, these programs are neither individual savings programs nor purely economic transfers. Rather, they are social insurance.

Insurance covers the uncertainty of death. Since individuals cannot foresee their own longevity, almost everyone benefits from a collective pooling of resources to cover the unknown needs for economic support after retirement. Some individuals may lose in the sense that they do not live long enough to collect their share, but they also gain because they lose only the amount paid in taxes, which is much less than what they would have to save for their individual retirement in the absence of a public pension program. Thinking of income transfers as social insurance and as part of an intergenerational societal compact rather than taxes and entitlements might help to change public understanding and allow for creative initiatives to reform current public policies.

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