

Paper prepared for the European Population Conference "Transitions: Opportunities and Threats" in Budapest, Hungary, 25-28 June 2014. Theme 10 History.

The Demographic Transition as Threat or Opportunity: French and Swedish Economists Views on Population, 1850 – 1930

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ABSTRACT

The late nineteenth century was a period of a changing and different population patterns in Europe. France experienced a long sustained period of declining population growth, what later came to be referred to as the demographic transition, whereas the population still grew in most other European countries. These differences came to shape the theories and discourses surrounding population issues expressed mainly in the two views of nativists and neo-malthusianism. We study the debates within France and Sweden and how they relate to the present situation on population growth. Economists in general tended to be more positive towards the ideas of Malthus than what was the case in general. Broadly speaking the debate concerned population growth versus poverty. We find that the demographic transition shaped and changed economists view on population. Economists who had been sympathetic to Malthus came to re-evaluate his model as the low population growth continued. In France with low population growth poverty came to be seen as a result of this as it impeded economic growth. In Sweden neo-malthusianists would call for overpopulation as a cause for poverty whereas the more general view would argue that the poverty was a result of institutional factors. Later also in Sweden the concern for the low population growth would raise similar arguments as made by the French economists.

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Long abstract

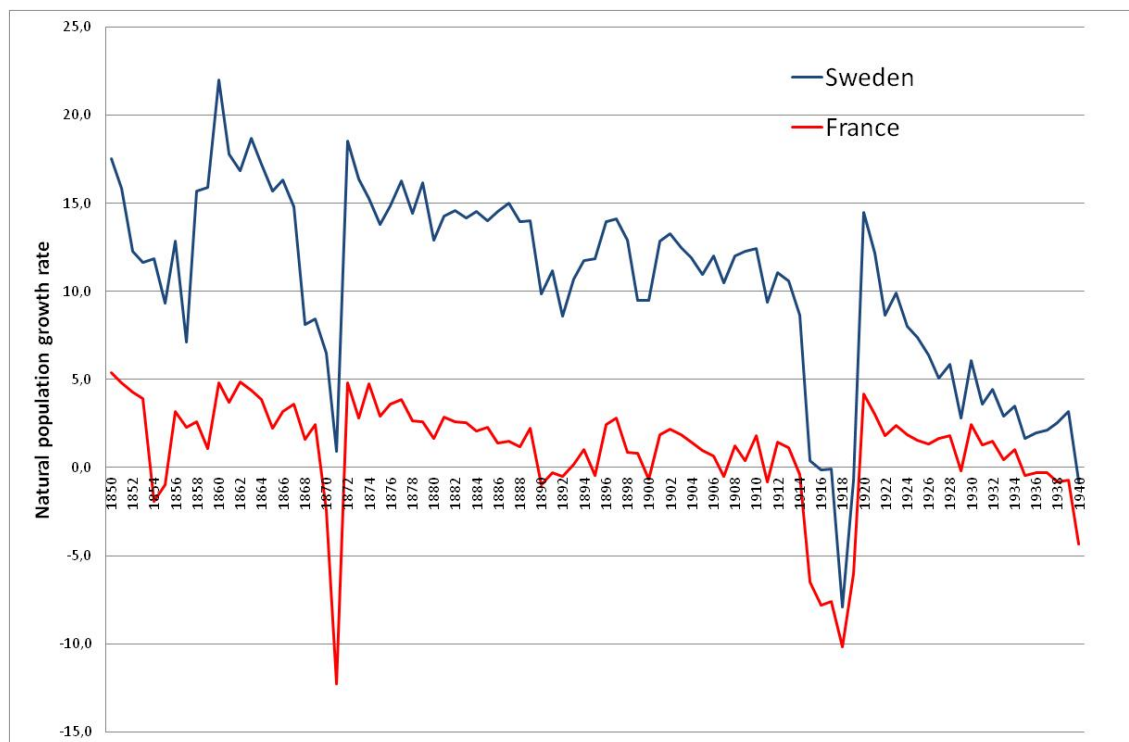
Introduction

As the demographic transition as a phenomenon was understood only later (the concept was created in the 1930s) the question is how the occurrence of this transition was perceived during its time and what policy recommendations it led to. We have chosen to study two countries France, as the first country to experience the demographic transition, and Sweden which came to experience the beginning of the demographic transition much later (in French textbooks on the subject Sweden is viewed as the typical “average case” for the demographic transition). We have also chosen to focus on the discourse among economists, the reason for this is that we have found that economists in most countries were more influenced by Malthus than researchers from other disciplines, thus carrying a “model understanding” of population. This is enlightening as it allows us to study when and how economists starts to break path with this “model understanding”. Also, economists in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were incorporating population issues as an integral part of their political economy.

The period is chosen because the neo-malthusian movement started in England in the mid-nineteenth century. The movement spread to limited circles in some countries. France was quite early to have an active sub-branch of neo-malthusians despite the more general discourse which was pre-occupied with the ongoing decrease in population growth. In Sweden a small group, whose most famous member was economist Knut Wicksell, started to agitate for neo-malthusianism in the 1880s. But as in France the general discourse argued for increased population growth.

As seen in figure 1 below the French population growth was considerably lower than that of Sweden and it is well known that it was the lowest in Europe at the time. What is interesting also to note is that apart from the alarming figures during the wars, the population decreased in France also during some years of peace early in the 1890s then several times in the early 1900s.

Figure 1: Natural population growth rates in France and Sweden, 1850 - 1940



The long and sustaining situation with low population growth in France was alarming and one result was that academics and policy makers alike searched for solutions. One way this concern was manifested was by the launching of academic contests to solve the issue of how to understand and encourage population growth.

Thus within France and Sweden there were active debates on the population issue. Our study focuses on three interrelated questions: 1) what (different) ideas and arguments were expressed in these debates in the respective country, 2) how did these ideas relate to the demographic transition, i.e. how did it affect the thinking among economists on the population issue, 3) what were the international influences on economists on the issue of population growth.

Sources and material

To answer these questions we combine traditional sources of the publications, texts and correspondence of the most important economists engaged in population issues coupled with a source which to our knowledge has not been tapped to the extent it deserves

(more or less not at all) – that of academic contests launched on the issue of population. This latter source is most useful as clearly the ongoing situation concerning population growth was a main reason why such contests were called for. This means that the contest can be used not only to study the ideas and arguments by those who participated in these contests, but also why the contests were launched as well as the comments made by the scientific jury.

So far we have studied one such contest –the *Prix Rossi* launched by the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences' Section of Political Economy in 1889. The theme was *The population; the causes of its progress and the obstacles that stops its growth*. Members of the Academy were among others economists, lawyers, historians from France but also from other countries. This section consisted of several well known and influential French economists, as Levasseur (secretary), Courcelles-Seneuil, Leroy-Beaulieu, Say, and also the famous historian Block. What is interesting with this specific contest is first of all the timing, it was launched at the first time France experienced decreasing population outside of a war (see figure 1 below). But it is also interesting because one of the submissions was made by Swedish economists and neo-malthusian Knut Wicksell, and this submission received an honorary prize.

This contest was one in a string of similar contests in France showing how the issue changed and gained in importance over the course of years as the decreasing population growth seemed to be there to stay. Also it is interesting as the French case was used by Swedish scholars in the debates, either as a threat or as an opportunity – depending on which side of the fence the scholar was in terms of population issues.

Preliminary results

As stated above the French scholars were concerned with the situation. Economists who first had been positive to Malthus came to change their views on the population issue. The low population growth was seen as a cause of low economic growth and thus poverty was a result of, not relieved by, this low population growth. In Sweden with a comparably high population growth a few neo-malthusians argued for it as a result of overpopulation but other viewed it as a result of institutional factors. The concern for small population low growth would be more severely emphasized in Sweden as well in the early twentieth century.