

## IDEOLOGICAL CURRENTS AND THE INTERPRETATION OF DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS: THE CASE OF FRANCIS AMASA WALKER

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Late nineteenth-century influences on American population thought are highlighted by focusing on Francis Amasa Walker's theory of native American fertility decline. Malthusianism, Darwinism, and racism combined to produce a new biological Malthusianism that identified a population calamity more harmful than overpopulation-biological deterioration. The plausibility of Walker's theory is examined with respect to contemporary demographic theory and demographic fact. Its reception by American social scientists is described: acceptance of biological Malthusianism was widespread, and scrutiny of an ideologically useful but empirically untenable theory proved difficult when the social scientific community shared a particular value position.

In a short life-span of fifty-six years, Francis Amasa Walker was a Civil War general, president of the American Economic Association (1885-1892), president of the American Statistical Association (1882-1896), president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1881-1896), and superintendent of the 1870 and 1880 censuses.<sup>1</sup> He is remembered by economists mainly for developments occurring early in his career, when he was a major actor in the revamping of American economics. He introduced statistics into the curriculum and effectively demolished the classic wage-fund theory, a bulwark of laissez faire economics.<sup>2</sup> His ascendancy to high positions within the profession marked the fall from dominance of the traditionalists. During the 1880s, however, Walker "grew more conservative" as he reacted to changes that threatened the position of old-line Americans, specifically, outbreaks of labor unrest and the influx of large numbers of eastern and southern Europeans.<sup>3</sup>

This essay focuses on a theory Walker developed during his later "conservative" years, and the reason why he is still remembered by American students of population. In 1891 he explained the native American's small family size: the influx of "inferior" immigrants willing to work for low wages heightened competition, and made the native "unwilling to bring sons and daughters into the world." Practically, this theory fostered a racial nativism that eventually resulted in the discriminatory national origins quota acts of the 1920s.<sup>4</sup> Intellectually, it exemplified a fusing of Darwinian and racial notions with those of classic Malthusianism that produced a new "biologic" Malthusianism. From Walker's time until the 1930s, the effect of demographic change on the biological quality of the population was a focal point of American population research. In fact, during this period of heightened racial and class anxiety, predictions of retrogression and doom were common,<sup>5</sup> leading many to point to the declining proportion of Nordics or Anglo-Saxons and to appeal to prejudice to prove race degradation. Because Walker's theory offered an explanation of a widely known demographic trend, it was both of great

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policy import and amenable to empirical scrutiny. Its acceptance by many American social scientists *without* such scrutiny, however, illustrates the power of race and class to subvert the scientific method.

A BIOLOGIC MALTHUSIANISM

Malthus wrote his *Essay on Population* in 1798, and for the next century population theorizing took place largely within a Malthusian framework.<sup>6</sup> This was true even in America, the country Malthus used to illustrate a population's ability to increase geometrically when encountering no shortage of resources. The lack of any subsistence check to population growth prompted a "debate" to develop among American students of population. Anti-Malthusians questioned whether the availability of subsistence actually did limit population growth, while Malthusians considered America's twenty-five year doubling time an unusual and temporary condition, the exception proving the Malthusian rule.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, early in the century all were measuring the nation's progress by its rate of population increase, and American discussions of Malthus had a decidedly abstract quality about them.<sup>8</sup> Some, like John Adams, were led to belittle the theory's significance.<sup>9</sup>

Two actual population trends, however, did capture the attention of Americans: fertility decline and immigration. Ever since the 1800 census, white fertility showed a continual decline. In 1843 George Tucker related fertility decline to urbanization and a rising standard of living: "Checks to natural multiplication, those arising from prudence or pride, will continue to operate with increased force as our cities multiply in number and increase in magnitude, and as the wealthy class enlarges."<sup>10</sup> This "standard of living" explanation conformed to basic Malthusian premises. The middle and upper classes, Malthus argued, delayed marriage and limited their childbearing to protect their standard of living. Though his gloomy forecast of the mass of mankind living in poverty as population continually pressed against the means of subsistence arose from his belief that the lower classes were not likely to exercise such "moral restraint," nineteenth-century American political economists came to be more optimistic on this point. They believed that a rising standard of living was inducing ever larger proportions of the population to act "prudently" in their reproductive behavior.<sup>11</sup>

Walker accepted this "standard of living" explanation early in his career though adding negative undertones to it.<sup>12</sup> As late as 1889, just two years prior to proclaiming his new theory, he still made no reference to immigration when explaining fertility decline: "It was the change from the simplicity of the early time to comparative luxury, including a rise in the standard of living, the multiplication of artificial necessities, the rapid extension of a paid domestic service, the increasing introduction of women into factory labor, the substitution of the hotel and boarding-house for the self-sufficing, self-contained family, which, in the main, constituted the retarding force . . . . It was all the natural result of the changed social and economic conditions under which the American people had come to live."<sup>13</sup> His novel theory, therefore, was not the result of slow accretion, but of sudden conversion.

The second population trend attracting attention was immigration. In the 1840s over one and a half million immigrants, nearly three times the number of the preceding decade, arrived in America. Most were destitute peasants fleeing starvation in Ireland. Opposition to mid-century immigration was quick to develop. Focusing on their poverty and their Catholicism, the Know-Nothing movement harnessed political support for stopping the flow.<sup>14</sup> In 1856 Samuel Busey juxtaposed the immigrants' high fertility with

the decreasing fertility of the native population, arguing not that their influx caused the decline, but that it threatened to change the American character.<sup>15</sup> But political economists of the time tended to find few economic difficulties with immigration. Amasa Walker, Francis's father and a renowned political economist, contended that the immigrants' labor was being put to productive use, that the nation's aggregate wealth was being enhanced, and that native wages were being "improved rather than injured." He reasoned that since "the general intelligence and enterprise of the native population are far in advance" to those of the newcomers, immigrants would become factory workers while natives would become managers.<sup>16</sup> Nathan Allen, a New England physician, took this tack when he explicitly related native fertility decline to immigration. Immigrants pushed the native American up the class structure. Native women no longer performed domestic chores; female immigrant servants did them. Native men no longer performed manual labor; male immigrants did the heavy work. This upward mobility, he argued, was accompanied by changes in tastes and habits that led to small families.<sup>17</sup>

As the century drew to a close a new population concern arose: Robert Porter, superintendent of the 1890 census, heralded the end of the frontier.<sup>18</sup> In a "filled" America, Malthusianism lost its hypothetical quality. Students of population were quick to apply standard Malthusian assumptions in their analyses of American population trends. With no frontier, an expanding population would lead to an era of declining marginal returns as resources became more scarce and costly.<sup>19</sup> Francis Walker used the passing of the frontier to argue that immigration had changed from being a positive to a negative factor in the nation's development: "There was a time, a long time, when every able-bodied man coming to our shores, however poor and even however ignorant, if not vicious or criminal, brought an added strength to the young nation. The more came, the more there was for all and for each. A continent was to be wrested from savage nature, was to be annexed, occupied, cultivated; and every one's help was welcome in the great work." He went on to note, however, that "to-day, the tracts of public land worth taking up under the homestead and preemption acts are few and far between." With the closing of the frontier, "a labor-problem is at last upon us." He contended that in this new environment, large numbers of poor immigrants only heightened competition and lowered the standard of living of the native worker.<sup>20</sup>

Initially, Richmond Mayo-Smith, professor of political economy at Columbia University, presented an analysis of unrestricted immigration's impact on native fertility that extrapolated from the accepted "standard of living" explanation of fertility decline. For him, "the ideal sort of population is not one that increases with enormous rapidity. It is one where there is a small number of births, a small number of deaths, and a long average life, and where the people are kept in good health and strength. Such an ideal population can exist only where there is a high standard of living, where there is prudence and self-restraint, and where there is the hope that the position of children may be better than that of the fathers." Unrestricted immigration increased competition between native and immigrant, and worked to lower the standard of living of the native. This made "prudential restraint" less likely among the native working class: "It is difficult at the best to induce a population to adopt the prudential restraint, — to refrain from getting married, and having children unless there is a reasonable prospect that their children will be able to maintain themselves in the same habits of life as their parents, — but a continuous immigration removes even that possibility, for the place which would have been taken by the children is now taken by the foreigner. Every reward for self-restraint and prudence is thus taken away."<sup>21</sup> Unrestricted immigration was a menace because

it threatened to end fertility decline among native Americans. Although conforming with accepted demographic theory, Mayo-Smith's analysis attracted little attention and no followers. Nor did he repeat it in his classic 1890 treatise, *Emigration and Immigration*.<sup>22</sup>

American population specialists had begun responding to a new Malthusianism, one that identified a population calamity more harmful than overpopulation: biological deterioration. During the nineteenth century, classic Malthusianism had mixed with Darwinian and racist elements. Darwin took Malthus's idea that superfluous reproduction provoked a fight for survival and used it to explain biological change.<sup>23</sup> Belief that competition and natural selection produced beneficial change had become nearly universal among educated Americans.<sup>24</sup> Many linked evolutionary notions with the racial theories that presumed a hierarchy of races then coming into vogue. John Fiske, for example, was an early advocate of Spencerian and Darwinian thought who went on to popularize Anglo-Saxon racism and to help establish the Teutonist historical school in America. Academics, overwhelmingly of north-western European heritage, found "scientific" theories identifying Teutons, Anglo-Saxons or Nordics as the superior race particularly captivating.<sup>25</sup>

Out of this mix of ideas, a biologic Malthusianism emerged that differed significantly from the classic sort. With class and race being used as surrogate measures of genetic quality, changes in a population's racial and class composition assumed a supreme importance. The low fertility of the native American and the influx of prolific and "inferior" peoples came to be viewed as a biological catastrophe: a regressive evolutionary process. The inverse relationship between class and fertility that was understandable from the vantage point of classic Malthusianism, became devastating and unacceptable.<sup>26</sup> Beginning with Galton, who took Darwin's idea of natural selection and proposed the process be aided through science to breed a superior human species, plans to correct this noxious imbalance were fashioned.<sup>27</sup>

The vision of a "filled" America facing resource limitations that emerged at the end of the century, therefore, did not produce calls for policies that would simply slow growth: ending immigration and encouraging fertility decline.<sup>28</sup> Most American students of population adopted biologic Malthusianism, and refused to advocate any activity that might lower the fertility of native couples. They did not oppose the Comstock Laws that made the distribution of contraceptive information and devices illegal, fearing that "prudent and thoughtful" natives would disproportionately avail themselves of birth control.<sup>29</sup> Instead, they first fought to prohibit the "sub-common representatives of certain unachieving and indistinguished strains" from gaining entrance to America, and later allied themselves with eugenicists to work for higher fertility from the biologically fit and lower fertility from the unfit.<sup>30</sup>

Walker, born of yeoman English colonial stock, responded to America's changing demographic reality in an exemplary biologic Malthusian manner. Captivated by racial theorizing, he started with Teutonism and evolved a version of Anglo-Saxon racism that attempted to explain America's singular superiority in evolutionary terms:

There is no reason to suppose that otherwise than through coming predominately from the intelligent and virtuous middle class of the old country, constituting thus a picked body from which were, in a great measure, excluded the weak, the vicious, the effeminate persons of dwarfed stature, tainted blood and imperfect organization, the first settlers of New England possessed any superiority in the quality under consideration over the English people in general. It was to their experiences,

extending through many generations, upon this inhospitable shore, that their descendants were to owe the development of a mechanical faculty which was to place them as far ahead of the English as the English are ahead of any other branch of the Teutonic race; as the Teutonic race are ahead of the Slavic or the Celtic.<sup>31</sup>

Having such a racial definition of the American character made it difficult to acquiesce to the surge in immigration of Slavs, Jews, and Italians that began in the 1880s.<sup>32</sup> He regarded their impoverished conditions as evolutionary proof of racial inferiority and foresaw assimilation problems:

They have none of the inherited instincts and tendencies which made it comparatively easy to deal with the immigration of the olden time. They are beaten men from beaten races; representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence . . . They have none of the ideas and aptitudes which fit men to take up readily and easily the problem of self-care and self-government, such as belong to those who are descended from the tribes that met under the oak-trees of old Germany to make laws and choose chieftains.<sup>33</sup>

Speaking at Lehigh University in 1887, he blamed America's expanding labor problems on the influx of "vast hordes of brutalized peasants" coming from "countries comparatively new to our immigration statistics." A detailed probe of shifting migration streams, however, awaited the appearance of his 1891 *Forum* article, in which he proposed his novel theory of native fertility decline.<sup>34</sup>

#### WALKER'S THEORY

In the *Forum* article Walker related nineteenth-century immigration and fertility trends. Massive immigration "checked the disposition of the native toward the increase of population at the traditional rate." In those "north-eastern and northern middle States" into which immigrants "poured in such numbers"

Our people had to look upon houses that were mere shells for human habitations, the gate unhung, the shutters flapping or falling, green pools in the yard, babes and young children rolling about half naked or worse, neglected, dirty, unkempt. Was there not in this, sentimental reason strong enough to give a shock to the principle of population? But there was, besides, an economic reason for a check to the native increase. The American shrank from the industrial competition thus thrust upon him. He was unwilling himself to engage in the lowest kind of day labor with these new elements of the population; he was even more unwilling to bring sons and daughters into the world to enter into that competition.

Immigration, instead of adding to the US population, only replaced native Americans with immigrants: "That if the foreigners had not come, the native element would long have filled the places the foreigners usurped, I entertain not a doubt."<sup>35</sup> Although this "displacement" notion had a long history in American population thought, Walker seemed unaware of earlier versions.<sup>36</sup>

He offered a "coincidence" of statistics to support his theory. Early in the century, during a period of minimal immigration, Elkanah Watson had made a set of population projections based upon the simple assumption of a constant rate of growth, the one present from 1790 to 1810. The decennial rate of increase in population from 1820 through the 1850s actually stayed quite close to Watson's prediction, even though immigration increased fourfold from the 1820s to the 1830s, and then nearly tripled again to 1,713,000 during the next decade. Why had the rate of population remained constant in the face of such substantial immigration?

Walker thought there were three possible answers: mere coincidence, the vacant places left by a decline in native fertility attracted foreigners to fill them; or, native Americans restricted their fertility in response to the influx of foreigners. Walker found the great accuracy of Watson's projections (coming within 50,000 of the actual 1840 and 1850 census counts) too improbable an occurrence to have happened by coincidence. Nor could he imagine, considering the state of trans-oceanic communication and transportation, how foreign peasantries would "know" the exact number of spaces that could be filled each decade by a fall in native rates. This left only the third possibility. He noted that "decline in the native element . . . occurred chiefly in just those regions to which the newcomers most freely resorted." And with the rise of immigration to over 5,250,000 for 1880-1890, and "with no assurance that this number may not be doubled in the current decade," Walker called for restriction to preserve "the nation's birthright."<sup>37</sup>

By 1896 Walker was so convinced that unrestricted immigration was the major reason behind nineteenth-century native American fertility decline that he attacked the traditional "standard of living" argument that was to be found in nearly every political economy text (including the latest edition of his own).<sup>38</sup>

Is the proposition that the arrival of foreigners brought a check to the native increase a reasonable one? . . . I answer, Yes . . . . It has been said by some that during this time habits of luxury were entering, to reduce both the disposition and the ability to increase among our own population. In some small degree, in some restricted localities, this undoubtedly was the case; but prior to 1860 there was no such general growth of luxury in the United States as is competent to account for the effect seen. Indeed, I believe this was almost wholly due to the cause which has been indicated.<sup>39</sup>

#### THE PLAUSIBILITY OF WALKER'S THEORY

The empirical justification Walker provided for his theory was remarkably meager, especially considering his access to census data and his acknowledged skill as a statistician. From 1790 to 1860 the nation expanded significantly in geographic size as new states entered the union, yet he did not consider this factor's possible impact on the nation's decennial rates of population increase. Although he asserted that native fertility decline was greatest in those areas receiving the most foreign immigrants, he provided no documentation. Nor did he divide the nation into regions experiencing high and low levels of immigration to see if their patterns of native population increase were different. He also failed to seek out consistencies and inconsistencies between rates of change in immigration and rates of change in population increase. Walker's failure to conduct appropriate statistical analyses raised doubts about the theory's validity.<sup>40</sup>

Even the "coincidence of statistics" that Walker did use was suspect. In 1891 he commended the accuracy of Watson's projections, yet in 1873 he had belittled Watson's methodology, explicitly objecting to Watson's assumption of a constant rate of growth. In that earlier year Walker attributed the accuracy of Watson's 1820-1860 predictions to blind "luck," and asserted that Watson's predictions for the remaining decades of the century would considerably overestimate the population growth of a nation that had begun "to leave agriculture for manufacturing pursuits."<sup>41</sup> After 1860 the rate of overall population growth actually did decline even as the pace of immigration picked up. Yet, for some reason in 1891 Walker decided to end his comparison between Watson's projections and actual census results in 1860, the last year for which a "remarkable accuracy" was evident.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps this was because treating post-1860 demographic trends

would raise doubts about his contention that each immigrant displaced a native birth. One would have to believe that over five million native births were stifled by immigration during the 1880s, a decade during which the entire population increased by less than thirteen million. One would have to believe that if ten million immigrants were to come in the 1890s, as Walker feared, almost no native couple would bear a child during that decade. Even as stated, there was a fantastic element in Walker's "coincidence of statistics": how could American couples possibly have "known" the precise number of births to forego so as to exactly compensate for the number of arriving immigrants during each decade from 1820 to 1860?

Walker's theory corresponded poorly with known fertility patterns. In 1843 Tucker had calculated that the white birth rate had continuously declined since 1790, including during the decades when immigration was insignificant.<sup>43</sup> In 1891 Oswald Ottendorfer observed that fertility decline is "especially noticed among the wealthier classes who never dream that their children have ever to compete with foreigners in the market for labor." Since the living standards of all classes had been increasing for some time, Ottendorfer called it a "mistake" to believe that "the reluctance of our native population to bring forth sons and daughters is due to the fear that they would have to compete in the market for labor with hordes of immigrants, whose customs are repulsive to them and who are lowering the standard of living."<sup>44</sup> Walker never did document a decline in the living standard of the native working class or even a specific decline in its fertility. Walker also never dealt with other anomalies that questioned his theory's validity. For instance, in "The Colored Race in the United States" Walker, documenting the US black population's shrinking decennial rate of increase (from 37.5% for 1800-1810 to 13.9% for 1880-1890), never explained why the low-wage population of the South had a lower rate of population growth than the higher-wage population. Nor did he offer a reason why the presence of a low-wage black population had not brought about significant fertility decline among Southern whites.<sup>45</sup>

There was actually little demographic need for Walker's theory. Fertility trends were beginning to be subjected to increasingly sophisticated analysis. John Billings, for instance, analyzed 1880 and 1890 US census data as well as international statistics and documented that the birth rate had recently fallen most rapidly in agricultural states, particularly in the South and among the black population, and least rapidly in the Northeastern states. He also noted that they had fallen throughout much of Europe. The fall, he thought, was due to "the deliberate and voluntary avoidance or prevention of child-bearing on the part of an increasing number of married people, who not only prefer to have few children, but who know how to obtain their wish." Changing women's roles and a rising standard of living were seen as fostering small family norms. Young women were "being imbued with the idea that marriage and motherhood are not to be their chief objects in life," that they "should aim at being independent of possible or actual husbands," and that "housekeeping is a sort of domestic slavery" which should be replaced by "remunerative employment." The "great increase in the use of things which were formerly considered as luxuries, but which now have become almost necessities" led married couples "to have fewer children in order that they may be each better provided for."<sup>46</sup> Billings made no mention of immigration in his interpretation.

The trends Billings noted implied that a general process of fertility decline was underway in all industrializing societies. It was spreading throughout Europe, and in the United States, where it began earlier, it infiltrated to the rural South by the 1880s. Walker's identification of immigration as the major factor in native fertility decline could make

