Gunnar Heinsohn, *Söhne und Weltmacht: Terror im Aufstieg und Fall der Nationen*
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NATO'S DEMOGRAPHER

Given the permanent social weight of population questions, it is remarkable that their hold on mainstream social and political discourse has been so intermittent and precarious. Within the academy, demography and demographic history are usually small, rather marginal disciplines, albeit duly respected for their rigour and for the brilliance of their top performers. Politically, population issues have normally been advanced from the right—and from might. They were foregrounded in mercantilist discourse on states and competitive power, in the dystopian political economy of Thomas Malthus and in the planning for national mass armies—particularly in France, with its avant-garde popular birth control. In the 19th-century Americas, the question was raised in the form of targeted immigration. 'To govern is to populate', it was said in Argentina. In Cuba and Brazil, European immigrants were perceived as an agency for the social transformation from plantation slavery to capitalism and commodity production, 'whitening' the population in the process. In North America, European immigration was the means to conquer the West.

The falling European birth rates of the 1920s and 1930s induced a major concern with population across the political spectrum, from Fascism to Scandinavian Social Democracy, via 'national government' Britain. In Sweden, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, the star couple of reformist modernism, managed to make population the basis of a large-scale social-policy agenda, which uniquely included easing women's participation in the labour force

and lifting restrictions on contraceptives, in a vast programme to promote voluntary parenthood. It also included, however, eugenic sterilization of the 'asocial' poor and the mentally 'retarded'. Both Social Democratic Sweden and Nazi Germany had a material impact on national population history, in contrast to the pure bombastry of Mussolini's Italy. But it was the German success—and subsequent military defeat—which discredited natalist population policies in the West, more or less up to the present day.

After 1945, Western population policy concentrated on birth control in the Third World, where it was held to be a major lever of economic development. The campaign was led by a dedicated but small force of North Atlantic Protestants and US philanthropists, headed by Baptist Rockefellers, along with Scandinavian internationalists and aid agencies. There was an early embrace of birth control in densely populated post-imperialist Japan, and secular Third World leaders such as Nehru and Nasser were sympathetic, in contrast to the Marxist Left. Hostile official opinion in Latin America began to change in the 1960s, but it was only at the 1984 UN Population Conference in Mexico that there was a global endorsement of family planning. By the 1960s, the active promotion of population growth was largely confined to Communist Eastern Europe, where fertility had plummeted with near universal female labour-force participation. In Hungary, this was largely confined to economic incentives—which did have some effect—whereas in Ceausescu's Romania the policy was pursued with characteristic brutality, outlawing abortion and contraceptives. For almost half a millennium Western Europe had been a region of out-migration, but in the last third of the 20th century, immigration became a factor—not as a population issue, but as a problem of cultural politics. The latest demographic development to attract political attention in Europe—although only in the past ten years—is ageing and decline. In the late 1990s, the EU research programme showed no interest in projects on this issue. Today, however, it is widely recognized and selective immigration seen as a solution to the problems of ensuring economic dynamism and social support of the elderly.

In social historiography and historical sociology, meanwhile, there have been some highly sophisticated investigations into the interactions of population change and political and economic development. One major debate centred round the work of Robert Brenner, who engaged with the then-prominent 'demographic model' for explaining the origins of capitalist development in Europe. The importance of population was not at stake, but Brenner's main concrete point was that the institutions of property and class relations of early-modern England set it on course towards industrial capitalism. He argued that 'under different property structures and different balances of power, similar demographic or commercial trends . . . presented very different opportunities and dangers and thus evoked disparate

responses'. As a serious historian, Brenner was not denying the force of population movements, but focusing on their variable institutional channels.

Another major intervention asserted the effectiveness of demographic power. Jack Goldstone's 1991 *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* focused on the English Revolution of the 17th century, but also looked at the French *Fronde* of the same period, and forward towards the French Revolution; with some sharp sideways glances at pre-industrial revolutions outside Europe, from the Ottoman Empire to Japan. Goldstone's main argument was that population growth undermined the existing balance of power and resources in societies with little capacity for economic or institutional adjustment. He demonstrated that in a number of instances demographic pressures, driven mainly by a decline in child mortality, were pushing against existing limits on 'available land, civil and ecclesiastical offices, and royal patronage', taking a variety of political and ideological forms. These included state fiscal distress, elite division or competition and increasing 'mass mobilization potential', as a result of falling real income, a young age structure and rapid urban expansion—London growing eightfold between 1500 and 1640. Goldstone's work was not subject to a wide debate, scholarly or political; but one result of this is that his 'demographic/structural model' of social revolution remains uncontested, at least among historically interested social scientists. Allowing for disagreements of emphasis, then, both Brenner and Goldstone agree that demography has important economic and political consequences, but that the latter are variable and have to be carefully identified and specified within different social arenas and mechanisms.

In recent years, however, a cruder approach—though one claiming vast explanatory reach—has attracted much attention in Germany. Gunnar Heinsohn's *Söhne und Weltmacht*—'Sons and World Power'—was first published in 2003, and has been through ten editions since then (no English translation has yet appeared). Heinsohn has been hailed by Peter Sloterdijk as the originator of a new field, 'Demographic Materialism'. Born in 1943, Heinsohn has recently retired from the chair of Sociology at Bremen, where he also directed a European Institute of Genocide Research. He has picked *Lesefrüchte* far and wide, thanks to a very agile mind, often short-circuited by grandiose intellectual ambitions. His early works include a theory of family law, co-authored with Rolf Knieper in 1974, and a theory of kindergartens and teaching through play, in 1975. He first became known, or notorious, in 1979, with a very idiosyncratic interpretation of Western European demographic history, *Menschenproduktion*—'the production of humans'. In the 1980s, following in the footsteps of another agile mind gone astray, the psychiatrist Immanuel Velikovsky, Heinsohn turned his attention to the ancient world, re-shuffling the established histories of Egypt and Israel to give the latter chronological precedence. In 1996 he published, with Otto Steiger, a

work on the 'unsolved enigmas of economics', *Eigentum, Zins und Geld*—property, interest and money.

But it was in 2003 that Heinsohn hit the mediatic jackpot, with the book currently under review. A work of popular demography, *Söhne und Weltmacht*'s rapid ascent to best-seller status in Germany was no doubt helped by its subtitle: 'Terror in the Rise and Fall of Nations'. Heinsohn here is a man with a political-demographic message, coming again from the right. Bluntly put, he wants to warn us that there are too many angry young men outside the Euro-American world today—above all, too many Muslim young men. It is well known, of course, that world data on age cohorts reveal a higher proportion of the young—a 'youth bulge'—in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, relative to overall population, in contrast to the higher proportion of the 'working-age' population in East Asia and Latin America, or the 'age bulge' of Japan and Europe. Heinsohn's contribution has been to interpret this as one of the principal threats to the West in the first quarter of the 21st century. As he generously acknowledges, Heinsohn picked up this notion from the US Defense Intelligence Agency. Clinton's DIA Director, Lt-Gen Patrick Hughes, had described the 'youth-bulge phenomenon' as a 'global threat to US interests' and 'historically, a key factor in instability' as early as 1997. But like a good Teutonic theorist, Heinsohn saw how to embellish the threadbare empiricism of American military bureaucracy with a world-historical idea: 'Surplus young men'—the German word is *überzähligen*, over-numerous—'almost always lead to expanding bloodshed, and to the creation or destruction of empires.'

The book contains three main arguments. Firstly, it proposes a view of the contemporary world-political situation as one of war, terrorism and civil conflict, due to the afore-mentioned youth bulge in African and 'West Asian' countries, which drives young men—above all, younger sons, battling for status—to various forms of violence. A 'youth bulge' is defined here, with the precision of an obsessive idea, as occurring when the 15–24 age bracket occupies more than 20 per cent of the population—easily predictable a decade ahead from the widely available 'child-bulge' data for the 0–15 bracket. The figures are laid out in the book's opening chapters, entitled 'Old–New World Enemy' and 'Where Do the Young Men Live?'—to which the answer is: mainly in Muslim countries. Heinsohn accepts that the youth bulge will have worked its way through in Africa and the Middle East by 2025, but argues that the global threat it will pose over the next few decades may make the twenty-first century even bloodier than the twentieth.

Secondly, *Söhne und Weltmacht* propounds a notion of European colonialism as produced by a population explosion, caused by the destruction of medieval knowledge of birth control. In two central chapters, 'The Demographic Origins of the Conquistadors' and 'World Power Yesterday and

Tomorrow: More Sons and Stricter Property Structures', Heinsohn explains that Europe's 'world expansion' was eminently successful because it was driven by societies with property rights, and therefore banks, credit and money. The sons of today's youth bulge, however, are located in poorer countries that lack the education systems to provide the status they seek. Finally, Heinsohn turns to consider the low reproduction and fertility rates in Europe, and to ask whether it would be possible to make European women more enthusiastic about motherhood. He has attacked French and German 'demographic Keynesianism', however, for encouraging 'uncultured' (*bildungsferne)* immigrant women to breed. A correct population policy would provide lavish incentives for educated 'career women' to have at least two children. For the rest he thinks that social entitlements and welfare payments should be abolished for all except the mentally and physically handicapped.

On what to do about the angry young men *ante portas*, Heinsohn is almost as discreet as his masters in Washington and Virginia. The director of genocide research is cautious not to say that killing them off may be the cheapest, most rational solution. Instead, he refers to a US strategy of 'win–hold–win', which may be translated into everyday language as kill (by pre-emption)–keep (other enemies down)–kill (next enemy, before he moves). Heinsohn makes clear that the 'war on terror' is a long-term offensive—'our whole life'—against waves of rebellious young men in the Islamic world. The book was written in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, of which Heinsohn was an ardent supporter, and contains its share of sombre meditations on 'genocidal dictatorships' and 'weapons of mass destruction'. In recent interventions, his perspective has become more policy-oriented—perhaps due to the fact that, on the basis of *Söhne und Weltmacht*, he is now a frequent guest speaker at the German Ministry of the Interior, Intelligence Service (BND) and NATO. Where possible, he argues, the angry young men should be left to kill each other, as in Somalia or Darfur. If that is not working, discreet military aid to the 'more civilized' side is suggested, with French arms for the Algerian regime against the Islamists a prime example. But should the angry young men become threatening to Western interests, a pre-emptive military strike will be necessary. No long-term occupations or attempts at 'state-building' should follow, however. These are not only costly but futile, as long as the numbers of angry young men continue to grow. The occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq have been a grave error, according to Heinsohn. He is strongly opposed to any UN or EU aid to Gaza, as it merely finances Palestinians' 'demographic armament'. Yet his maverick views can equally disconcert established opinion from the other side—calling in the *Wall Street Journal* for Europeans to welcome a quarter of a million young Palestinians into their midst immediately, so as to relieve the pressure in Gaza.

Strangely, however, for someone with a love—perhaps unrequited—of demography and its implications for power, Heinsohn is silent on one crucial variable in the relation between 'the West' and angry young Muslim men: their comparative killing capacity. In Israel's 2009 war on Gaza, the ratio was about 100 to 1 between Israelis and Palestinians. In the first phase of the second US war on Iraq, it was closer to 1,000 to 1. This is a major absence in Heinsohn's analysis. Superior killing capacity played an often decisive role in European expansion, from Pizarro's defeat of the Incas in the age of the musket to the victories of the French and English in Africa in the age of the machine gun. Such capacity can, of course, run up against demographic limits. Israeli leaders have begun to argue that the demographic clock ticking in the Palestinians' favour may make some sort of 'two-state' solution unavoidable, to block talk of the far-worse scenario of a single state; the ignominious end of Israel's old ally, apartheid South Africa, is writing on the wall.

In fact, for all his admiration of the Pentagon, Heinsohn's first international love seems to be Israel, or more deeply Judaism, seen by him as an ethical example. (This is not an expression of any ethno-religious chauvinism, but an ideological choice. As the son of a Third Reich submarine captain, Heinsohn is unlikely to have had any important Jewish ancestry.) He launches a bitter attack on European critics of the post-1967 West Bank settlements, noteworthy since he has been charged with leading an institute of genocide research. Yet the well-protected settler movement would surely qualify for that term under the broad definition given to it by the UN after World War Two that included population removal by deportation and harassment. By the standards of the Hague Tribunal on the Yugoslav wars of secession, the entire Israeli political and military leadership would be locked up for life.

Heinsohn's scholarly reputation among German academics of his own generation is, on the basis of an informal survey, slight—'zero', as one colleague put it; but it is generally acknowledged that his media presence as an original intellectual is not undeserved. Both poles of the evaluative spectrum are understandable from a reading of *Söhne und Weltmacht*, even if the book—essentially a pamphlet of some 15,000 words—does not merit Sloterdijk's description of it as the *Kapital* of our times. Certainly, to anyone taking demography—or, indeed, history—seriously, Heinsohn's account of European population growth from the late 15th century is impossible to swallow. This is no insignificant matter since the same dynamics led, according to the author, to Europe's subsequent world conquest. Heinsohn argues that pre-modern European contraceptive knowledge was wiped out by a massive witch hunt, which struck against midwives in particular, backed not only by the Catholic Church but by, for example, Martin Luther. Contraception

became subject to capital punishment. The ensuing population explosion led to imperialist expansion—initially in Portugal and Spain—and to domestic revolution in the Netherlands and England (Goldstone is selectively referred to). Following Heinsohn's fast track through future world history, Europe's late-fifteenth century demographic turn not only formed the modern world through colonial conquest but, in exporting its contraception-phobia, determined subsequent global population history: 'The transition . . . to the population explosion of the world begins when, in the European conquered areas, birth control is punished as harshly as on the Old Continent'.

Such an account either discards or ignores virtually the totality of demographical-historical scholarship. The established picture suggests that there was no 'new' European growth curve from the late 15th century—that would occur two centuries later—but rather a recuperation from the devastations of the fourteenth-century Plague. According to such works as Livi-Bacci's *Europa und seine Menschen*, or Wrigley and Schofield's *Population History of England*, European demographic movements were largely governed by, or related to, food prices and real wages. A uniquely flexible system of late marriages, which kept a significant proportion unwed, operated west of a Trieste–St Petersburg line, following the frontier of mediaeval Germanic settlement. On a world scale, the main thrust of demographic knowledge—codified, too rigidly in your reviewer's opinion, in J.-C. Chesnais's theory of 'demographic transition'—is that the acceleration of population growth was driven by declining mortality. While Heinsohn absurdly exaggerates the importance of pre-modern birth control, as well as political and religious power over it, there is a good deal of evidence that contraception in fact appeared in the 17th and early-18th centuries among various elite groups: the Jewish bourgeoisie in Italian cities such as Livorno and Florence, the patriciate of Geneva, English peers and Swedish noblemen.

Can a 'youth bulge' explain the rebellions of 1968? In France there was indeed an extraordinary growth in the number of teenagers—almost 50 per cent—between 1960–70; it was somewhat less in the US. In Italy and the UK there was only a modest increase. In Germany and Sweden there was a small decline, although the Swedish 20–24 age group increased by more than 40 per cent. Frustrated status competition, however, does not seem to have had any bearing upon the 1960s youth rebellions. The 1960s and early 1970s were the golden years of Continental European economic and employment growth. University jobs were multiplying, rapidly growing welfare states provided new labour markets for women, the white-collar labour market expanded enormously and factories were facing acute labour shortages, to be met only by inviting immigrants to northwestern Europe. Personally, as a 1960s radical of the baby-boom generation, in retrospect I find our insouciance about job and career prospects quite remarkable. Even

those of us who, like me, did not come from a privileged or intellectual background, were convinced that after periods of intense political activity we would find a decent job, somewhere. In his *Birth and Fortune*, the American economist Richard Easterlin remarks on a relative decline in the income of young household-heads, in comparison with middle-aged ones, concomitant with a rise of political alienation. But the problem with Easterlin's data for explaining 60s rebellion is that the most rapid decline took place after 1973, which was not when radicalism accelerated. Similarly, Louis Chauvel's study of French cohorts, *Le destin des générations*, finds a generational economic decline later, among those turning 20 in 1975 and after.

Like all other data, demographic statistics can become ridiculous when extrapolated from their broader social-historical context. Sweden, with virtually complete population figures going back to 1750, the oldest in the world, had a 'youth bulge' from the 18th century, and most likely before that, until the First World War. This has so far added nothing of any significance to our understanding of Swedish history. Demography, even when deployed in a scholarly manner, is not a moral science—which explains, in part, its attractiveness for military bureaucracies. The youth-bulge argument can tell us nothing of the oppressive character of the Shah's regime in Iran, the terror of the Zionist occupation of Palestine, the horror of the US wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, the insults of the Islamophobes, the hypocrisy of capitalist liberalism, or the stifling closets of patriarchy. The conservative appeal of ideas such as Heinsohn's is their debunking quality: you think you are protesting against this or that, but in fact you are only competing blindly for status in an overcrowded youth bulge. Yet Pentagon fears of angry young men, from whom a contingent of angry young women should not be *a priori* excluded, cannot simply be dismissed as irrational paranoia. This rebellious youth may indeed be a harbinger of social change; but the direction of that change will be decided by political struggle.

Militarily, national population size means little in an epoch characterized by high-tech weaponry and the deployment of mercenary forces by great powers. Today, demographic trends are more likely to have economic effects. Refraining from any pseudo-deterministic predictions, the ageing societies and falling populations of Europe and Japan are likely to mean a long-term decline relative to the US, Brazil, China and India. Japan will never now become 'number one', nor is the EU ever likely to become the 'world's most competitive knowledge-based economy'. There have been some strong arguments for a positive demography of economic development: mercantilism saw population growth as an asset, not a social problem. In the 20th century, the Danish agronomist Esther Boserup proposed a sophisticated theory of the positive significance of population growth. Its lived truth for agrarian economics is exemplified most eloquently in the Netherlands:

densely populated from early on and the major pioneer of land reclamation and agricultural innovation. In recent years the Harvard economist, David Bloom, has stressed the ratio of working-age to dependent—young and old—population sectors: in this model, children and the elderly are seen as a burden, while 'prime' adults are an asset. Bloom and his colleagues have argued that the comparative weight of the working-age population is a major component of the East Asian economic miracle. The Irish bulge of working-age youth, together with a decline of the birth rate, has also contributed significantly to its—by European standards, extraordinary—rise of per capita income over the past two decades. The Arab world and Africa, meanwhile, can look forward to splendid working-age bulges in about thirty years' time.

The paradox of demography is that, while it informs us about human life, it also facilitates an instrumental view of human beings. Historically close to state-power concerns, it is a science of peoples, as well as of populations. Practised paradigmatically, demography, and historical demography in particular, is a demanding, impressive intellectual effort. The left's focus on political and economic division and polarization has often missed the weight of sums and their effects. At the same time, demographic arguments have since Malthus been used as a club of raw biology, with which to batter down hopes of popular rights and coexistence. Today we are witnessing the rehabilitation of a neo-social-darwinist discourse, a demonization of extra-European youth on a circuit that feeds from CIA and Pentagon strategy papers to Bremen research institutes, and from there into the liberal media, NATO commands and Israeli public discourse, on the eve of the Gaza attack. In Gunnar Heinsohn, his reception and his ilk, the world is experiencing a vengeful return of ideas that flourished before 1945, with the same scorn for the uncivilized, for lesser breeds, for the rights of other peoples.