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Book Review: On the Cusp: From Population Boom to Bust by Charles S. Pearson

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environment inter-relations: population and sustainable development (John Becker and McFarlane), population and climate change (Karen Hardee), and population and food security (Richard White). The contributions make extensive use of illustrations, maps, graphs, and occasional tables. Formulas are kept to a minimum, with the exception of the two chapters on measures (Hamilton, Yeatman). The authors are diligent in citing the scholarly literature that is the basis for their assertions: each chapter typically has 40–60 endnotes. The volume gives scant attention to mortality and health (other than reproductive health), or to international or internal migration, and therefore it does not serve as an introduction to demography as a whole. And the content is weighted toward contemporary developing countries, with high-income post-transition countries appearing only incidentally in graphs and tables that present region-specific averages for the entire globe. Index.—J.C.

CHARLES S. PEARSON

*On the Cusp: From Population Boom to Bust*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 256 p. $34.95.

It has only taken fifty years for the world’s “population problem” to be transformed from rapid growth threatening massive starvation to imminent decline threatening economic stagnation. Charles Pearson, Professor Emeritus of International Economics at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, pays close attention to both historical shifts in theories and new empirical findings to arrive at a moderately optimistic assessment of how demographic and economic variables are interacting in a world “on the cusp” of population decline. In Chapters 1 through 4 Pearson outlines the origins of the world’s old population problem. He traces the rise of pessimistic theories that described in the language of “traps” how rapid population growth worked against increasing living standards. He begins with Malthus’s original theory and ends with post–World War II development theories based on the Harrod–Domar model. He sees pessimism declining later in the century as “new growth theory” highlighted technological progress, not capital accumulation, as the main driver of economic growth and as fertility decline spread. Chapters 5 and 6 examine “optimal population” and the “demographic transition,” two concepts Pearson considers important in understanding contemporary demographic–economic interactions. He finds optimal population to be an “elusive concept” when examined closely but thinks that the demographic transition is extremely useful in identifying the economic policy implications of rapidly declining fertility (a “demographic bonus”) and increasing longevity (a “demographic burden”). Chapters 7 through 10 examine demographic–economic interactions in the era of population decline. He looks both at its upside, the potential easing of pressures on natural and environmental resources (Chapter 7), and its downside, the potential fall in output per capita as the workforce declines in relative size and as productivity drops as a result of an aging population (Chapter 8). Pearson argues for “a new metric of aging” that defines the old as those with fifteen or fewer years of life expectancy remaining and accepts the compression-of-morbidity thesis that the old are experiencing more disability-free years. He sees potential, therefore, for higher labor force participation among those over age 65. In Chapter 9 he examines the strain that rapid
aging puts on the traditional intergenerational transfer bargain calling for the working generation to simultaneously support both the young and the old, but he outlines a set of “coping strategies” in Chapter 10 that gives him confidence that these strains are manageable. He concludes that “a bright new and perhaps less crowded future” is a distinct possibility.—D.H.

ANTOINE PÉCOUD
Depoliticising Migration: Global Governance and International Migration Narratives

This slim, readable volume is the result of the author’s analysis of some 3,000 pages of major international organization policy documents dealing with international migration. These include the Report and Plan of Action of the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development, the International Organisation for Migration’s annual post-2000 World Migration Reports, the United Nations Development Programme’s 2009 Human Development Report on human mobility, the 2006 Report of the United Nations Secretary-General on international migration and development, and the International Labour Organisation’s 2005 Multilateral Framework on Migration. What, he asks, are these documents taken as a whole really trying to say? He argues that the international migration narrative that emerges from them consists of four basic points. Migration is a normal phenomenon in a globalizing world. States are failing to meet the challenges posed. States will be unable to implement immigration policies (which is after all what they really care about) without cooperating with other states—a process, the author might have added, made easier by relying on international organizations as buffers, brokers, and go-betweens. Finally, migration plays a key role in pursuing global objectives having to do with development, reducing global disparities, and human rights—areas in which international organizations have unique legitimacy.

A pervasive theme is the attempt to order and tame international migration in its many dimensions: one taxonomy presented lists seventeen issue areas, many with multiple sub-issues. The overarching goal is to manage migration through an appropriate division between state and international institutions (what the author calls a “federating discourse”) of competences and responsibilities. International organizations’ migration literature seeks to establish a shared set of assumptions and common language from which shared policies will consensually emerge.

Yet the need for consensus requires the de-politicization of what is a robustly political area. This is accomplished in four ways. Ambiguous terms and notions that can accommodate any political point of view are used. Abstract arguments allowing international organizations to avoid taking concrete positions on politically consequential issues are deployed. Political issues are reduced to technocratic ones. Finally, the global economic and political architecture in which migration takes place (and from which international organizations derive their legitimacy) is never questioned.

The author is a sociologist/social anthropologist and had nearly ten years of experience in the migration unit of a UN organization after graduate school before