

Matthijs, K., Neels, K., Timmerman, C., & Haers, J. (Eds.). (2015). *Population change in Europe, the Middle-East and North Africa: Beyond the demographic divide*. Routledge, 330 pp. ISBN 9781138546752

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This is an edited volume that has emerged from the workshop “Population Change and Europe: Thinking Beyond the Demographic Divide” organized by the Saint Ignatius University Centre, Antwerp in 2012. The book brings together contributions from prominent experts in the population field, including Ronald Skeldon, Frans Willekens, and others. It aims to address the contrasting demographic trends in Europe and in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), by demonstrating “how demographic change interacts with changing economic landscapes, social distinctions and political realities” (p. 3), and by trying to analyze some of the main drivers of demographic change (including the economic context, family policies, the impact of educational differentials, and the attitudes towards marriage). Attention is paid also to the causes and implications of the shifts in the age structure associated with population ageing, but also with the “youth bulge” in the MENA region.

The volume attracts attention by focusing on two regions that are rarely treated in comparative perspective, especially when it comes to demographic change. This in itself is a merit of the book, as Europe and Middle East and North Africa are connected by geographic proximity and historic ties, but also brought apart by cultural and other factors. The two regions are often seen as demographic antipodes—Europe is associated with rapidly ageing populations and a dramatic overhaul of the normative structures behind childbearing and union formation/marriage; the MENA region on the other hand is associated with the youth bulge, and more traditional marriage and reproductive behaviours. At the same time there are important demographic parallels between the two regions. A notable example are the marriage patterns. Historically, western Europe was characterized by late marriage and high proportions never married, something that John Hajnal termed the “European marriage pattern” and argued that it is “unique or almost unique in the world” (Hajnal, 1965, p.101). Over the past decades countries in the Middle East started to exhibit features of this pattern – particularly late marriage and possibly increase in the proportion never married. For example, in Algeria the proportion of women aged 20 to 24 who are married dropped from 64.9 to 21.6 percent between 1977 and 2008 with very little evidence of pre-marital cohabitation (Botev, 2020).

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In short, by focusing on Europe and the MENA region, this volume promises an interesting read, and comparisons with significant analytical and heuristic potential. The book is structured in 3 parts, with 3 chapters each. The first part focuses on Europe. The opening chapter is authored by Frans Willekens, and offers a broad overview of the demographic transition, focusing on Europe, with frequent comparisons with other regions (however there is not a single mention of the Middle East and North Africa). One of the strengths of the chapter is that migration is considered in the context of the demographic transition, something which is rarely done in the demographic transition literature. The following chapter, by Jonas Wood, Jorik Vergauwen, and Karel Neels, examines the effect of macro-economic conditions on fertility, and especially on the decision on whether and when to have the first child. The analysis covers 22 European countries during the period 1970 to 2005. It pays special attention to the regional diversity of trends in Europe, and especially on the patterns of family formation in Eastern Europe. Again, reading the chapter someone may forget what the title or aim of the entire volume are, as there is no mention of the MENA region. In the third chapter, Olivier Thévenon addresses policy issues raised by low fertility, and is understandably also Europe centered. The author warns that policies designed to increase fertility may fail to meet the objective of relieving welfare states from the “burden of population ageing”, and argues that policies promoting active ageing and immigration need to be considered, alongside the pronatalist ones.

The second part focuses on the MENA region. It opens with a chapter on the demographic transition in the Arab world, authored by Paul Puschmann and Koen Matthijs. It provides an overview of demographic trends in the twentieth century, with emphasis on fertility decline in the post-World War II period. The authors stress the central importance of the trend towards later marriage for the fertility decline in the Arab world. Interestingly, there is no reference to Europe’s historical experience with late marriage. In my opinion, comparing the current marriage patterns in the Arab world with those of pre-World War II western Europe could offer important insights into the mechanisms that drive reproductive behaviour in contexts where sexuality is under stricter control and confined to marriage. The following two chapters look at the inter-relation between demographic and political change. Richard Cincotta in a controversial chapter 5 argues that the changes in the age structure affect significantly the likelihood of transition to stable democratic governance. His hypothesis of where high levels of political liberalization could be expected, and where they should not in the MENA region, has already been questioned by the post “Arab Spring” developments in the region. Youssef Courbage and Paul Puschmann also look at the “youth bulge” in chapter 6, but put emphasis on the changes in education attainment and suggest that the countries in the region are gradually converging demographically with the developed world. Notably, this is the only chapter with an author with direct connection to the Middle East (Youssef Courbage is a French demographer with Syrian roots).

The third part of the book is entitled “Pathways for Policy”. It opens with a chapter on population ageing and the fiscal sustainability in the European Union, written by Marga Peeters and Loek Groot. Understandably, the chapter will be of special interest to the readers of this journal, as the authors try to assess the “threat” posed by population ageing, along with the debt crisis, to existing formal systems of old-age financial support. For me it is an example

of the overly-alarmist approach to ageing. The last two chapters in the book are the only ones to explicitly link Europe and the Arab region. In the first of them, authored by Vincent Corluy and Gerlinde Verbist, this is done through an empirical analysis of the labour force integration of immigrants in Belgium, using Labour Force Survey (LFS) data from 1995–2010. The last chapter is a reflection by Ronald Skeldon on the challenges and opportunities that immigration presents for European societies, and the likely macro-level scenarios of both immigration and emigration. The author challenges the common assumption that Europe is facing a migration crisis that could undermine its economic and cultural identity and integrity. According to him, Europe needs to move from a region that needs labour to a region that wants migrants, seeing them “as part of state building” (p. 289).

In the beginning I intentionally cited the title of the workshop on which this book draws, so that a careful reader would note that it was Europe focused. Obviously, *post factum* a decision has been taken to add the MENA region to the volume. Edited volumes are notoriously prone to uneven contributions (unless a strong editor manages to ensure consistency and coherence, which is not the case with this book). The fact that the MENA region was added *post factum*, further underscores the unevenness in the reviewed volume. There are also technical issues with the analysis in some chapters. For example, the analysis of marriage patterns in the MENA region uses widely the singulate mean ages at marriage (SMAM) – an indirect indicator of the timing of first marriage. This is understandable, given the data limitations in the region. In the absence of civil registration data, the age at marriage could be estimated based on the proportion never married at different ages obtained from censuses or surveys. As John Hajnal who developed SMAM points out, this is an indicator based on a number of assumptions, including stable marriage patterns during the 35 years prior to the census/survey used for the estimation, and a stable population during the 50 years prior to it, as well as no migration in the marriageable ages (Hajnal 1953). Clearly, all these assumptions are violated in the MENA countries. None of the two chapters (4 and 6) that use SMAM for the analysis addresses these assumptions, their violation, and the impact of it on the trends and patterns that are discussed.

Notwithstanding all the flaws (possibly even because of them), I found the book thought-provoking. Given the wide range of topics discussed, many might find something of interest. All in all, though, I found the volume to be a missed opportunity for something bigger and better, which comparing demographic change and how it interacts with social and economic change in two regions like Europe and in the Middle East and North Africa lends itself to.

References

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