

# What Kind of Theory for What Kind of Population Geography?

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## ABSTRACT

**This paper raises the issue of the role of theory in population geography. In the last decade there have been calls for population geographers to become more involved in the wider debates of human geography and related social sciences, including a plea for (re)theorisation of the subdiscipline. Yet, there has been little response. Since theory is not an optional extra, why this lack of enthusiasm? One explanation, I suggest, relates to an uncertainty about the different kinds of theory that inform empirical population research. Using the example of demographic transition theory, I identify different 'layers' of theory (population theory, theories of society, and philosophical theories) that underpin population research. I argue that, in addition, population geographers must recognise the continuing importance of disciplinary cultures and attend to theories of space and place. Understanding difference and diversity must lie at the heart of population geography's contribution to the multidisciplinary arena of population studies. It is the ideas of postmodernism that have 'legitimised' such understandings in the wider social sciences. At the same time, these ideas have introduced an ultimately nihilistic pluralism. Resolution of the resulting tension is the greatest challenge currently facing the discipline of geography. My entreaty is that population geographers recognise this challenge and, as part of the (re)theorisation of the**

**subdiscipline, become more involved in the debate. Copyright © 2000 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.**

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## INTRODUCTION

The birth of a new millennium encourages reflection on both past and future. This may thus be an apposite moment to reflect on the recent past and immediate future of population geography, a moment to question 'business as usual' and to recognise issues that remain unresolved. One such issue concerns the role of theory. During the 1990s, a few voices were raised suggesting that population geography would do well to take heed of developments in other parts of human geography and in related social sciences (Findlay and Graham, 1991; Fielding, 1992; Halfacree and Boyle, 1993; Halfacree, 1995; Harper and Laws, 1995; White and Jackson, 1995). Amongst these was an explicit call for the (re)theorisation of population geography (White and Jackson, 1995) which seems largely to have fallen on deaf ears. This is surprising, as a concern for theory development was also being expressed in closely related areas of human geography, such as health geography (Litva and Eyles, 1995; Philo, 1996), and even in demography (McNicoll, 1992; Caldwell, 1996; Greenhalgh, 1995, 1996). Despite this climate of concern for theory, there is no lively debate in population geography to match that in health geography, where the (re)formation

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of medical geography continues to be invigorating (Kearns, 1993; Mayer, 1996).

Apart from a general reluctance to abandon a dominant empiricism, there may be two further reasons why so few population geographers have taken up White and Jackson's invitation to join the debate. Firstly, debates about theory can often seem abstract and removed from empirical research, with the gap between theory and practice appearing difficult to bridge. Those heavily involved in the latter may suppose that it is incumbent on the more theoretically minded to provide some kind of route map before they venture down what may, after all, turn out to be a cul-de-sac. Secondly, the nature and variety of theoretical positions that might underpin a (re)theorised population geography make the task of theory development particularly daunting. Whilst it is easy to agree with Caldwell (1996: 309) that '... some theory, perhaps barely articulated, must underlie all analysis', the explicit articulation of these theoretical underpinnings is a matter of considerable complexity and requires that we attend to several inter-related 'layers' of theory. It is this second difficulty for any project of (re)theorisation that provides the focus for the following discussion.

Theory development in population geography, and in population studies more generally, is an important issue warranting wider debate. This is especially so at a time when a new generation of population researchers (and a few of the older generation) are actively introducing new ideas and methods in their empirical work. Recent discussions of qualitative methods in demography (Obermeyer, 1997) and multi-method research in population geography (McKendrick, 1999) open up a range of exciting new possibilities for future research. Yet there is a danger that this 'softening' of population research does nothing to counter the field's reputation which, like that of demography, remains one of 'all method and no theory' (Greenhalgh, 1996: 26). As I have argued elsewhere (Graham, 1999), there is an urgent need to recognise the inter-relationships between methods and theory in order to realise the full potential of these new approaches. Theory, then, is not an optional extra.

The most basic problem in any discussion of

theory is deciding what is to count as a theory, since the term is used in a variety of ways (Sayer, 1992). Moreover, confusion can arise where different protagonists in a debate make different assumptions about what 'theory' is. For the purposes of what follows, I intend to be as inclusive as possible. A theory, then, will be taken to be any set of ideas, or conceptualisation, which goes beyond the particularities of individual cases and offers some more general framework, or account of the nature of certain circumstances, relationships or events. In addition, a theory must have explanatory force, which is to say that it must contribute to making these circumstances, relationships or events intelligible. No doubt the natural scientist, and some social scientists, would demand a more rigorous definition which specifies the kind of statements (e.g. law-like statements) of which a theory is composed. I deliberately avoid such precision here in order to side-step the debate between science and non-science, although it can be noted in passing that Hauser and Duncan (1959) appeared to have adopted the natural science definition when they declared the ideas of the demographic transition a 'non-theory'.

With these preliminaries in mind, we can now begin to address the question in the title of this paper: what kind of theory for what kind of population geography? As a starting point, I will assume that population geographers see their work as both embracing demography and contributing to a subdiscipline whose parent discipline is geography. First, I will examine the theoretical underpinnings of population studies more generally in order to elaborate the 'layers' of theory that underlie our research. In doing so, I will identify three sorts of theory that must inform any study of population, and briefly consider the relationships between them. I will then examine the distinctive nature of population geography and the extent to which this might be reflected in any theoretical development, before concluding on a note of caution which recognises the importance of adopting a critical attitude in any project of (re)theorisation. The discussion will inevitably be incomplete, and not simply because of the brevity of this contribution. Contemporary population geography addresses a considerable diversity of subject

matter and, in an effort to ground the discussion in familiar examples, there is much that will be ignored. In particular, little will be said about migration studies despite its pole position within population geography. As the pages of this journal amply illustrate, migration research employs a wide variety of approaches and methods to reveal the diversity of migratory patterns and experiences. Yet, as Koser and Salt (1997) point out in their research review on the geography of highly skilled international migration, a strong empirical standpoint has meant that analyses are still theoretically limited. Thus, my inattention to migration studies should not be seen as the glaring omission it might initially appear. Migration research may dominate population geography (Underhill-Sem, 1999) and be more in touch with its geographical roots, and migration researchers may have shown a greater openness to new methodologies (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993; Gutting, 1996; Boyle and Halfacree, 1998), but even here a critical engagement with many aspects of theorising is lacking (Findlay and Li, 1999). Thus concentration on a few examples should not be read as exclusionary, for many of the points raised have a more general relevance.

#### THEORIES UNDERLYING POPULATION RESEARCH

A review of recent literature in the wider field of population studies clearly reveals the continuing dominance of quantitative, often highly technical, empirical research, with the contents of three leading English-language demography journals (*Demography*, *Population and Development Review* and *Population Studies*) suggesting that fertility and related topics are currently the most studied within demography itself (Greenhalgh, 1996: 30). Population geography, of course, has tended to favour migration studies and a greater range of approaches. There is good reason to think that this particular division of academic labour has important disadvantages, as migration, fertility and mortality are closely linked. Some mixing of interests between demographers and population geographers has certainly taken place over the last couple of decades, but the composition of the two fields of study

remains rather different and is a reminder that not all criticisms of one can be taken to apply to the other. Nevertheless, in so far as population geography and other areas of population studies look to demography for their research agendas, the concerns and problems of demographers are shared more widely.

Currently, there is a slowly dawning recognition that demography might be in trouble and that its predicament may, in part, be the result of prioritising technical development over the accumulation of theory (McNicoll, 1992). If Greenhalgh (1996) is right, then it is the way in which twentieth-century population science has been constructed and, in particular, its isolation from debates in the social sciences that has resulted in a lack of theoretical vitality and created the current crisis. Her analysis is challenging and highly critical, as is reflected in her conclusion:

'The discouraging conclusion one might draw is that, through decades of skewing their research activities, institutional arrangements, training programs, and scientizing practices to the needs of a policy-oriented market, demographers may have become institutionally incapable of producing broad social theories of fertility, especially historically and politically informed ones, that are not tied to the instrumental projects to reduce fertility that the field has helped to promote and legitimize since the middle of the century.' (Greenhalgh, 1996: 59)

In her discussion, she claims both that theory has languished and that many of the assumptions of one of the few enduring theories, demographic transition theory, had been recognised as problematic some time ago in other areas of the social sciences.

A decade before, in 1986, Coleman and Schofield edited a volume entitled *The State of Population Theory: Forward from Malthus*. The collection is interesting for three reasons. Firstly, although the focus on Malthus is deliberate, the inward-looking nature of most of the discussion is notable. The vast majority of references are to the works of other population researchers and, despite the topic, no attempt at all is made to examine possible inputs from more general social science theory.

Yet, secondly, the theoretical weakness of demography is explicitly, almost cheerfully, admitted. The editors open the discussion with the following statement:

'Any subject which finds it necessary, or indeed possible, to consider its material divorced from an appropriate body of theory must be in trouble. This seems to be the case with demography at present...' (Schofield and Coleman, 1986: 1)

They then proceed to highlight the general problem of integrating ideas at the same scale (e.g. the ideas of Malthus and Marx at the level of total population size and growth) and at different scales (e.g. ideas about the family and about institutions in relation to demographic responses), leaving the reader to decipher the precise relationship between this 'outstanding problem' and the state of population theory. Thirdly, the editors frame the introductory discussion in terms of science. This is evident in their use of phrases such as 'quasi-experimental designs' and 'may not even be falsifiable', although they recognise that large parts of demography may remain remote from the canons of scientific inquiry. Their devotion to rigour and quantification is nicely captured by their claim that 'In the end, demography without numbers is waffle, an amiable kind of social natural history' (Schofield and Coleman, 1986: 4). This, then, is a continuation of the tradition of scientising to which Greenhalgh (1996) draws attention and which, it seems to me, takes a rather narrow and inward-looking view of theory.

The published literature on demographic theory also tends to confirm Greenhalgh's (1996) claim that theory has languished, although this requires some qualification. Leaving migration research to one side, there seem to be only two main, and not unrelated, contenders for the accolade 'population theory' and neither is a recent arrival. The theoretical hare set off by Malthus in the eighteenth century and predicted to be still running in the twenty-first (McNicoll, 1998) is one. Demographic transition theory, a twentieth-century construction, is the other (Caldwell, 1997). Both provide a general understanding of population relationships which transcends the details of particular

circumstances and events, and both have been remarkably enduring despite sometimes harsh criticism. Whatever our view of their strengths and weaknesses, they represent a certain kind of theory in population studies. As theories, they operate near the empirical research frontier, suggesting research questions and framing research analyses. Their central concepts (population growth, fertility, mortality) are those that lie at the heart of demography, and their relevance to population research is obvious. Even if we suppose that both are fundamentally flawed, we can recognise the potential of this kind of theory for making demographic changes intelligible.

There are, however, other kinds of theory that can and do inform population research. Indeed, it is my contention that, in order to further theory development in population studies, we need to understand the overlapping layers of theory that underpin and inform any research. I will discuss three of these 'layers', or kinds of theory, namely population theories, theories of society and philosophical theories. These are broad categories and I will take examples in each in an effort to relate the familiar to the less familiar. My purpose in doing so is both to establish the relevance of different kinds of theory to population research, and to demonstrate the complexities of what might be involved in a (re)theorisation of population geography.

### Population Theories

I have already suggested that Malthusian theory and transition theory are the two theories that have been most influential in demography. The latter, in particular, often frames empirical work in population geography even where studies deal with small populations and limited geographical areas (see, for example, Hionidou, 1995; Ramiro-Fariñas and Sanz-Gimeno, 2000). I will take transition theory as an example of population theory for the purposes of this discussion since it has attracted much comment recently, and the controversy surrounding it opens up the possibility of further theoretical debate. This theory sees long-term demographic change as linear. In its basic formulation, populations are said to move from an initial phase charac-

terised by high mortality and fertility (and low population growth), through two intermediate phases where mortality, then later fertility, begins to fall (producing a population boom), before reaching a final phase of low birth and death rates which re-establishes low population growth. The explanatory force of the theory derives from linking these general characteristics of demographic change to economic and social change often summarised as 'modernisation'. Questioning of these ideas has begun to undermine their hegemony, but what is remarkable about the comments found in the literature is the variety of views they reflect. There are those, like Szreter (1993) and Greenhalgh (1996), who believe that the theory not only fails empirical tests but also prejudices empirical research and should be abandoned. Others, like Kirk (1996) and Mason (1997), recognise that it may have some failings but are prepared to build upon what they see as its strengths. Still others are finding further transitions and constructing multicausal theories within the same general framework (Lesthaeghe, 1998; see also Jones *et al.*, 1997). I do not want to rehearse these arguments here. Rather, my concern is with the nature of population theory and its relationship to both empirical research and other types of theory.

Demographic transition theory is a first-order theory, which is to say that it involves an initial abstraction from the details of empirical data on the characteristics of populations. It thus generalises the intricacies of particular instances. At a minimum, it claims to provide a general framework within which long-term demographic changes in Europe can be understood. In this, it relies upon the marshalling of empirical evidence to support its claim. At one level, then, it is crucially dependent on the details of empirical research, for if they contradict its central propositions then the theory must be abandoned. Some have read the results of the European Fertility Project (Coale and Watkins, 1986) as just such contradictory evidence, while others see the same results as misleading when used as a 'test' of transition theory (Mason, 1997). This highlights one aspect of the problematic relationship between empirical research and population theory where each is dependent on the other, and

judgements about the appropriateness of the theory must, by their very nature, depend upon *interpretations* of the empirical evidence. Judgements of relevance are no more avoidable and the scope for debate is considerable. Nevertheless, theories of this kind (i.e. first-order population theories) must have a direct empirical justification, however difficult that might be to judge in practice.

Both supporters and detractors of transition theory recognise other weaknesses of classical demographic transition theory, which fails to give a clear account of the mechanisms or causes of change. References to the impact of modernisation on mortality and fertility lack detail, and thus limit the theory's usefulness as a tool for understanding long-term trends in vital rates and confuse its accountability to the empirical evidence. It is unsurprising, then, that since Notestein's statement of the theory in 1945, there have been numerous attempts to investigate the causalities that link economy and society to mortality and fertility. Some of these have been thought of as themselves being theories. Thus, in her discussion of fertility transitions, Mason (1997) identifies six major theories, including classic demographic transition theory, Caldwell's theory of wealth flows, neoclassical micro-economic theory of fertility, and what she refers to as 'so-called ideational theory'. She criticises these theories for focusing on only one or two causes and thus for assuming that all fertility transitions have a common cause. She is less explicit about the relationships between these theories, although her outline of a more fruitful approach to understanding fertility transitions uses important ideas from several. In the conceptual model she presents, Easterlin's proximate determinants play a central role, whilst she emphasises the ideational and interactive nature of the model. Further, she implicitly retains the framework of classic demographic transition theory by citing mortality decline as an important, if loosely linked, precondition to fertility decline. This can be taken as an example of how several first-order population theories (i.e. generalisations dependent upon detailed empirical evidence on population change) may overlap. However, whether we have here one theory or several is a moot point. If the theories of causal connec-

tion, whether competing or complementary, serve to add to or modify classic transition theory, then, arguably, they are themselves parts of a grander theory which generalises to a greater degree.

It may be thought that debates about what constitutes a theory are tediously semantic and ultimately unresolvable. However this may be, it seems to me that different conceptions of the relationships between these various generalisations I have called population theory help to explain radically opposing claims in the literature. While most population researchers who reflect on the matter appear to bemoan the lack of theory in demography, Mason takes the opposite view, claiming that, since 1952 when Rupert Vance in his presidential address to the Population Association of America asked 'Is Theory for Demographers?', '... one might say that demographers have indulged in social science theorising with a vengeance' (Mason, 1997: 443). Mason, I think, overstates her case, but it is another aspect of her claim that is of particular interest here. Demographers are said to have indulged in *social science* theorising, not simply demographic or population theorising. I take this to be an implicit recognition of the influence of ideas, including theoretical ideas, from anthropology and economics on the population theories she discusses. Thus, population theory shades into other social science theory even in what might be called mainstream demography. Recognising this connection draws attention to a huge theoretical literature of potential relevance to population studies, and takes us to our second kind of theory.

### Theories of Society

It is in relation to theories of society (i.e. social, cultural and economic theories) that the critiques of Greenhalgh (1996) and White and Jackson (1995) take hold. Although there are important exceptions, such theories frequently attempt to distil the major characteristics of societies, cultures and economies in the most general sense. The ambitions of population theory also go beyond a general understanding of demographic change in one area and one historical era. Thus Kirk (1996: 365) sees the greatest strength of demographic transition

theory as being '... the prediction that the transition will occur *in every society* which is experiencing modernisation' (my emphasis). In contrast, for Greenhalgh (1996) this is its greatest weakness. Her critique includes the contention that, because of the way in which the discipline of population science has historically been constructed, many demographers continued to espouse a population theory based on the already discredited assumptions of a theory of society (i.e. modernisation theory) formulated outside demography. Two points are of particular interest: firstly, the recognition of the social construction of a discipline in which social structures and disciplinary culture direct and constrict its practitioners; secondly, and not unrelated to the nature of the dominant disciplinary culture, the failure of demographers to acknowledge the relevance of theories of society and to engage in wider theoretical debates or learn from the theoretical work of other social scientists. In development studies, for example, modernisation theory has been the subject of numerous critiques and was effectively criticised by dependency theorists during the 1970s, since when the theoretical discourses of postmodernism have provided a sweeping condemnation of both (Peet, 1997). Although the ideas of postmodernism may seem far removed from empirical population research, it is not difficult to demonstrate their relevance (Graham, 1995). Methodological pluralism, in the spirit of postmodernism as method, holds potential for a shift towards more differentiated understandings of population processes, including reproductive behaviour (Sporton, 1999).

Demographic transition theory, at least in terms of its ambitions, is a thoroughly modernist theory. Like both modernisation theory and dependency theory, it provides a general picture of change over time which is predicated on a linear view of history in which the West sets the standard and is further along a given path of progress than the Third World. Like modernisation theory, demographic transition theory, in some of its versions, denies the Third World a history and assumes that progress consists of achieving the characteristic conditions of the West. A few population researchers have indeed recognised transition

theory's neglect of the structural and historical forces implicated in change (Demeny, 1988; Szreter, 1993), but despite the evident grounding in modernist ideas of this major population theory, there seems to be an almost total lack of enthusiasm amongst population researchers for engaging with the challenges of post-modernism. What must be recognised is that demographic transition theory, or any other population theory, is not only accountable to the empirical evidence on population change, but also to the coherence of the conceptions of the society that it embraces. If the latter can be shown to be fundamentally flawed, then the theory may be mortally wounded, whatever the empirical evidence on population change suggests.

Mason (1997) attempts to circumvent this particular criticism of transition theory by emphasising the ideational and interactive nature of fertility change, where both perceptions and pre-existing conditions influence the impact of particular forms of change on fertility. This takes transition theory into the realm of social norms and hence cultural and other differences both between and within populations. If a better theory of fertility change requires attention to these aspects of social life, and I think that it does, then it is surely incumbent upon population researchers not to neglect social theory. White and Jackson (1995) provided a few pointers as to how an engagement with social theory might serve to (re)theorise population geography and, by implication, population studies more generally. For example, if we take seriously the idea that events are 'instantiations' of social structures in the sense that they both reflect and reproduce these structures, then birth 'events' must not be seen in isolation but as part of a social practice given meaning and value by the structures in which they are embedded. No longer do we have a linear view of a few proximate causes (e.g. a particular level of wealth or availability of contraceptives) triggering an effect (i.e. the number of births), but a dialectical set of social relationships which must be seen as changing together. The role of social structures (such as institutions of marriage or religious institutions) in conferring meaning and value on demographic 'events' is hardly captured by Mason's insistence on the

importance of perception. Furthermore, debates about the nature of culture also assume a relevance here as culture can be seen as actively mediating between local circumstances and structural conditions to create distinctive meanings (Agnew, 1993). Since, on this account, meanings are social constructions, then the meanings of demographic events are likely to vary widely (White and Jackson, 1995). Nor can we suppose that this variation will be conveniently confined to heterogeneity between national populations. Socially constructed meanings may be contested within populations, challenging the aggregations of national population 'types' on which transition theories depend. Thus serious attention to social theory can impact on our own understandings of demographic change in quite profound ways and, therefore, on the characteristics of the population theory we might seek to construct.

Both demographers and population geographers have been slow to recognise the import of ideas from social theory for their own research, despite some very recent attempts to stimulate debate. Astone *et al.* (1999), for example, argue for the introduction of sociological theory to the field of demography. They see mutual benefits to scholarship of an engagement between sociological theory and social demography, focusing particularly on the development of a framework for analysing place-specific processes of transformation in family life. The concept of social capital, they contend, should be reintegrated with social exchange theory in order to illuminate why individuals manifest particular family-building behaviour. Since scholarship that uses this concept currently suffers from 'fuzziness and inconsistency', they are drawn into a wider debate about the nature of social capital. Their discussion thus underlines not only the dialectical relationship between informed empirical understanding and theoretical debate, but also the necessity of a critical engagement with theoretical concepts.

Culture is another concept increasingly employed in contemporary demography, with explanations of fertility decline emphasising the role of ideational change, notably change in ideas about the acceptability of birth control. At the same time, demographers have come

under criticism from anthropologists for their '... lack of conceptual clarity about just what is being referred to when culture is invoked' (Kertzer, 1995: 44). They stand accused of conflating culture and social organisation, and of separating culture from agency (Carter, 1995); in short, of using anthropologically outdated notions of culture (Kertzer and Fricke, 1997). Fricke (1997) argues that this situation arises because of demography's historical inattention to debates in culture theory, and is problematic because of the recognised need to incorporate culturally shaped motivations into demographic analyses. Much the same criticism could be levelled at population geography, including some part of migration research. However, in this case the inattention to debates in culture theory is even more perplexing given the cultural turn in other areas of human geography (Duncan and Ley, 1993), since it cannot be explained simply by reference to disciplinary boundaries. Perhaps, as Kertzer and Fricke (1997) argue in relation to demography, the funding successes associated with the quantitative analysis of large data-sets have served to maintain a pragmatic approach to research which has impeded theoretical progress. Certainly, incorporating 'culture' in the mainstream of empirical population geography requires new thinking and a participation in the wider debates.

Underhill-Sem (1999) conveys a similar message, although addressed more directly to population geographers. She calls for a rethinking of demographic events which recognises their social construction along with the intimate relationships between power and knowledge. Again, she recognises the importance of theoretical debate and, although she commends (along with Skeldon, 1995) the introduction of innovative methodologies by those researching migration geographies in the Pacific, she is also concerned by their lack of theoretical justification. The absence of explicit attention to questions of social theory (and of epistemology) must be seen as a significant limitation in any attempt to transform research practice in population geography.

This brief discussion hardly touches the surface of the ways in which social theory might refashion population studies, but it does

fulfil the limited purpose of demonstrating its relevance. Being convinced by the ideas of social constructivism or postmodernism is not a prerequisite for entering the debate about modernist theorising, nor is disliking the dismissal of treasured ideas a good reason for staying out. Why there is no critical theoretical literature in population studies equivalent to that in development studies is an interesting question which undoubtedly demands an answer sensitive to the intellectual histories of those areas of study described by Schofield and Coleman (1986) as the 'softer outer rind'. It is further evidence, however, for the contention that theoretical development has failed to parallel technical and empirical advances in population studies. It also supports the view that '... a little more philosophy in our work might enrich our scholarship' (Underhill-Sem, 1999: 24), a view further confirmed by examining our third layer of theory, philosophical theories.

### Philosophical Theories

No academic research, however mundane, can avoid making philosophical assumptions. Since the broad purpose of academic research is to acquire knowledge of the world, it must assume some epistemological stance. This is to say that it is, of necessity, based on some philosophical theory about how knowledge is acquired (Graham, 1997). Disciplinary cultures socialise practitioners in particular ways of acquiring knowledge, and like the structures of language to the native language speaker, epistemological stances may remain hidden. Theoretical development in any empirical discipline will thus be informed by theories of knowledge, however taken-for-granted these may be. The role of philosophy is, of course, much wider, and since it is concerned, in the most general sense, with the concepts that structure our thinking, philosophical theories of causation, human nature, truth and falsity, as well as ethical theories, are all likely to have relevance to population theory in one or more of its guises. Philosophy is probably the most fundamental of all knowledge and it is hardly a revelation to claim that the theoretical structures of other disciplines are built upon philosophical foundations.



Although philosophical assumptions permeate population theory, they can be difficult to articulate. Rather than attempt to do so in a general way, I want to demonstrate the direct relevance of philosophical thinking to population theory by examining another aspect of transition theory. Perhaps the central idea in classical transition theory is one of historical progress. As 'modernisation' progresses, so death rates, then birth rates, fall and the population emerges from the transition as a low mortality and low fertility regime. Furthermore, these staged changes are deemed irreversible. According to the initiators of the theory, European populations were the first to go through the transition, but as modernisation and westernisation spread to other countries, other populations would experience the same staged changes. Kirk (1996) believes that this is exactly what happened. Mortality, he says, has fallen in every country and '... the fertility transition is becoming universal and every country can be placed on a continuum of progress in the transition, as was predicted some 50 years ago.' (Kirk, 1996: 382). I want now to use these claims about the demographic transition to show that, although the empirical evidence of changes in vital rates mentioned by Kirk is not immaterial to our judgement of the theory, it is not the only 'test' we can impose.

Three points are worth noting about the claims of the transition theorists: firstly, the centrality given to the notion of progress and its implication of improvement, i.e. change for the good; secondly, the measurement of progress against a European yardstick (i.e. for non-European countries, change for the better is change as Europe experienced it); thirdly, the causes of change in non-European populations are thought to emanate from Europe, with non-European populations progressing by adopting the characteristics of European populations. The last two of these points seem closely associated with claims of cultural superiority and the theory has, quite rightly, been condemned for its Eurocentrism, at least by Greenhalgh (1996). Conceptually, however, the notion of progress is not itself dependent on either a European yardstick or any other assumption of European cultural superiority. To abandon the Eurocentric predilections of

the classic theory is not *necessarily* to dispense with the notion of progress as a way of rendering intelligible long-term historical demographic change, for the two are conceptually distinct. If life expectancy doubles over time in any population, in any part of the world, whatever the causes, is this not evidence of progress of some kind, i.e. change for the better? The empirically minded may want to delay judgement until more detail is known. Perhaps if lower mortality was won at the cost of individual freedom, or longer life expectancy failed to increase the number of disability-free years lived, the answer would seem less obvious. What philosophical analysis can demonstrate, however, is precisely what is required to make such a judgement. Any theory of history that interprets the course of events as 'progress' needs not only to be able to provide an accurate general description of change over time (the empirical evidence) but to relate the description to normative principles by which that change may be judged. This in turn opens up a host of issues surrounding the nature of normative principles and their historical and cultural specificity. Thus, although it is plausible to suppose that all societies at all times have believed that increases in life expectancy are a good thing, it is markedly implausible to make a similar claim about low rates of fertility.

The normative principles assumed by classic demographic transition theory, even stripped of their more overt Eurocentrism, turn out to create other problems for the theory's notion of progress. However, it would be premature to abandon all efforts to identify and interpret long-term demographic change as a basis for theory development. This is a point of some import, since the perceived failures of demographic transition theory might be thought to hold this implication. Giving shape to the past is both an empirical and a philosophical enterprise and, to the extent that population theories depend upon an historical understanding, theory development in population studies will be aided by an awareness of the philosophical complexities of the concepts on which they might be based.

So far, we have been concerned with the layers of theory that demand attention from anyone concerned with theory development in

population studies. By their very nature, population theories do not stand alone but overlap in terms of both substantive concerns and underlying assumptions with other kinds of theory. Demographic transition theory provides a good example of this complexity, and the analysis above hints at the scope of the issues involved in any attempt to retheorise population studies. There is, however, one aspect of theorising about which I have so far been silent, namely the role of space and place. Not surprisingly, demographers, like many social scientists in the past, have shown little interest in questions of space. Certainly, demographic transition theory can be given a crude spatial expression in terms of the diffusion of 'modernisation' from Europe. None of the recent discussions of the theory have paid more than passing attention to this aspect, however, and even population geographers tend to ignore the writings on space and social theory that have become so influential in other parts of human geography. There is, thus, an additional layer of theory which I will argue is both relevant to theorising in population studies more generally and of particular relevance to geographers. Using demographic transition theory as a starting point, I want now to consider such theories of space and place, along with their role in a (re)theorised population geography.

#### POPULATION GEOGRAPHY AND THEORIES OF SPACE AND PLACE

With the benefit of hindsight, it is evident that initial formulations of demographic transition theory included a very crude conceptualisation of space. Space was seen as a container of national populations, and these populations were divided into three basic types, each at a different stage in the transition (Thompson, 1929; Notestein, 1945). This ignored the heterogeneity within nations and encouraged a questionable use of national averages to summarise demographic characteristics. Diffusionist ideas are also evident in these early expositions and have been further developed more recently, although mainly in relation to the highly restricted concern of the spatial spread of contraceptive ideas and technology in developing countries. In the European

context, we find the language of diffusion influencing proposals for a new transition project which would seek to establish, among other things, 'leads and lags' (Van de Kaa, 1999). Even Kirk (1996), whose recently expressed views are generally favourable to transition theory, criticises discussions of diffusion dynamics in population studies for their lack of conceptual clarity, and McNicoll (1992: 406) declares diffusion a problematic term, a 'description in search of a theory' which hardly begins to illuminate the 'culture of networks'. It is Greenhalgh (1996), however, who widens the critique by expressing concern that the very narrowly defined diffusion approach to understanding fertility decline, which, she observes, is growing in popularity amongst demographers, not only perpetuates the Eurocentrism of modernisation theory but also introduces a greatly impoverished view of culture. At the same time, and with respected exceptions in studies of disease diffusion (e.g. Cliff *et al.*, 1981), once-popular diffusion theory has fallen out of favour in human geography. Despite developed critiques from other human geographers (Blaut, 1993), however, a sustained theoretical critique of diffusionist ideas in fertility studies from population geographers is still awaited. This suggests that population geographers are not playing to what should be their strengths, at least in terms of a theoretical engagement with demography.

Concerns with the nature and dynamics of space and place are archetypically geographical concerns and, arguably, fundamental to the identity of human geography. Thus Gregory (1994), to take only one recent example, centres his *Geographical Imaginations* around the concepts of place, space and landscape. Yet, beyond an empirical attention to spatial distribution and the spatial movement of people (migration studies), there is surprisingly little evidence that population geographers see the nature and dynamics of space and place as a focus of concern. I have remarked on this noticeable fissure between population geography and human geography elsewhere (Findlay and Graham, 1991) and will not repeat that argument here, but rather develop it in a slightly different direction.

Each area or subdiscipline within geography and within population studies has an identity,

however implicit or hazy it may be. This identity develops, at least in part, in response to the institutional structures of academia as they have evolved over time (Greenhalgh, 1997). Disciplinary cultures, then, provide the grounding for normative judgements about the coherence and worth of individual research projects, influence research agendas and mediate relationships with other disciplines. Some disciplinary identities are stronger, or more sharply defined, than others. Demography, as Greenhalgh's (1996) analysis demonstrates, has constructed its identity tightly enough to circumscribe the role of other disciplines in demographic research. Both she and Caldwell (1996), although in different ways, reach the perhaps pessimistic conclusion that the disciplinary differences between demography and anthropology are currently substantial enough to preclude a fruitful abandonment of disciplinary demarcation. If they are right, then it is important to recognise the different disciplinary cultures within population studies (i.e. the varied, socially constructed disciplines or subdisciplines of which population studies is composed). Greenhalgh's (1996) advice that historians and anthropologists should domesticate demographic issues rather than attempting to invade demography may apply equally to population geographers.

Articulating the disciplinary culture of human geography is fraught with difficulties, not least because geography has come to be seen as a very fragmented area of study. As Benko and Strohmayer (1997: xiii) put it, 'Human geography, after all, never was granted anything like the straightforward delimitation of a subject area so common to other academic subjects'. It is unsurprising, then, that the subdisciplinary identity of population geography is equally unassured. This circumstance no doubt has some advantages, such as an openness to new ideas, but it also appears to hold disadvantages, especially in relation to the task of developing theory. What is surprising is that many population geographers seem to have been unwilling to apply their 'geographical imaginations' to this task and link their understandings of population to the new understandings of space and place burgeoning not only in other areas of human geography but in

the social sciences more generally. Perhaps it is time to renegotiate our subdisciplinary identity, not in the sense of erecting barriers to protect our academic turf, but rather to ensure that the research agenda of population studies reflects a sound theoretical understanding of space and place.

White and Jackson (1995) gesture at the possibilities here but make no explicit mention of spatiality. They draw attention to the socially constructed nature of some of the ways in which we (population geographers) categorise population groups (for example, by gender, 'race' and age), and emphasise the necessity of recognising that social categories are contested. We can take this further, however, by acknowledging that space too is a social concept and, what is more, a basic category of thought and perception (Shields, 1997). Space is also implicated in the construction of identities, both individual and group. Cultures are 'situated' and places are created by the habitual interactions over generations between people and space. Thus the aggregate categories used by population geographers need to be sensitive not just to the social construction of identities *but also to their spatiality*. Even in the hard core of demography, understandings of fertility decline which, since the European Fertility Project (Coale and Watkins, 1986), have focused on cultural values rather than economic modernisation as the explanatory 'variable', would benefit from a more nuanced and theoretically grounded conception of culture and thus of the spatiality as well as the social construction of identities. This is surely one area in which population geographers could reassert their own 'geographical' identities.

It is not only the nature of the categories used to conceptualise population groups that requires population geographers to attend to notions of spatiality. As was noted earlier, Schofield and Coleman (1986) identify the difficulties of relating ideas at different *scales* as one of the outstanding problems of demography. The different levels of analyses they had in mind range from the macro to the micro and assume, rather than state, a relationship to spatial scale. However, more recent ideas in cultural geography challenge representations of space embedded in, for example, the use of

national, regional and local populations as appropriate scales of analysis, since this taxonomic device lacks theoretical grounding. As in classic demographic transition theory, such classifications treat space as empty, as merely a convenient way of identifying groups of people.

Yet geography matters more than this conception allows. Culture is neither fixed in historical time nor set in place. Rather, culture, time and space are dynamically and inextricably interwoven. Thus, not only must we recognise the contextuality of the cultural practices associated with fertility or migration, for example, but we need theories of space and place to inform our understandings of these practices. Agnew (1993) argues that places, in their differentiation from other places, can become an 'object' of identity for a 'subject', reinforcing the social-spatial definition of place from inside. This sense of place need not be restricted to small geographical areas and is part of a complex interchange between cultural practices, economic processes and, thus, demographic change. Culture, therefore, is not a simple 'variable' that might be causally connected to fertility decline or rates of migration. Nor is it a set of practices that define unplaced population groups. Thus relating different scales of analysis in population studies may be more difficult than is typically assumed, and these difficulties, I suggest, arise more from the conceptual complexities of the substantive relations involved than from the technical difficulties of ensuring compatibility of data at different geographical scales. Recognising that culture, like social organisation, is a human project requires more than a pragmatic selection of variables or the collection of additional survey information. It demands both an engagement with recent concerns in demographic anthropology and a critical extension of culture theory to provide an understanding of the spatiality of culture. These ideas may still seem opaque but they illustrate the relevance and potential of a strategy of theory development in population geography which looks both to the wider literature of the social sciences (including human geography) and exercises our geographical imaginations. Theoretical understandings of what Shields (1997) calls 'social

spatialization' is still in its infancy, but progress in population geography may ultimately depend on joining the debate.

#### CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A CRITICAL POPULATION GEOGRAPHY?

Recognising the complex role of these layers of theory in empirical population research is a first step in any project to retheorise population geography. There are, however, attendant dangers in a less than full involvement in theoretical debates. Where disciplinary cultures become enslaved to particular modes of theorising, as has arguably happened in economics, a myopic disregard for empirical evidence may result in a world that seems to have been made up for the benefit of theorists (Clark, 1998). Geographers, including population geographers, have a long tradition of attending to difference and diversity between people and places. Indeed, McDowell (1995) sees this as the *raison d'être* of the discipline. Contemporary social theory encourages a theoretical recognition of this diversity in its questioning of the privileged status of 'grand narratives', or metatheories. Demographic transition theory might be regarded as a grand narrative of population research and, like the stylised facts of economic theory, its disregard of diversity seen as its major failing. This criticism itself, however, demands theoretical justification, embedded as it is in wider ideas of situated local knowledges and power relations.

Population geographers have, over the last decade or so, become increasingly sensitive to the diversity of individual experiences in different times and places. Furthermore, this sensitivity is reflected in a greater willingness to employ a variety of methods in empirical research and to accept the contribution to understanding of small-scale studies, sometimes based on qualitative data. Much of this work, however, remains within an empirical tradition in which theory is barely articulated (see, for example, Lockwood, 1997). There have been notable exceptions such as a recent discussion of ecopolitics which identifies 'a new frontier for geographical studies of population' and offers a political ecological framework that transcends both Malthus and

Marx (Shrestha and Conway, 1996). Using a case study from a remote area of the world in Nepal, the authors provide an innovative rethinking of the role of peasant ecology which challenges the acceptance of Western values and modern notions of development. In this, they emphasise the complexities of the local ecopolitical battle as well as its diverse roots both locally and in wider settings. Situated cultural knowledge, in terms of environmental practices, is seen as part of a nexus of social relations, state policies, development interests and demographic forces, with the local being mediated through the national and the global. Their discussion exemplifies not only the dialectical relationship between theory and empirical understanding, but also the advantages of breaking out from a narrowly defined population geography by attending to other literatures.

The postmodern movement in social theory also concerns itself with the idea of situated knowledge and, it seems, has 'legitimised' difference not only in terms of allowing the disempowered a voice but also in its encouragement of methodological diversity. Yet, to borrow from Katz (1996), the avowed partiality of the resultant theoretical claims presents its own problems. The epistemic advantages of a single way of theorising appear to be lost to an ultimately nihilistic pluralism (Bridge, 1997), to theory as 'fashion' (Barnett, 1998). There is a tension between recognising diversity and removing the normative grounding which prevents methodological choices from seeming utterly arbitrary (McDowell, 1995; Bohman, 1999). This is the 'fine balance' that, Wynn (1999) argues, characterises geography at the millennium. If a failure to resolve the tension promises an 'interestingly catastrophic' future for geography as a discipline, then population geographers may be asleep on the Titanic.

I have argued that the development of theory in population studies is not merely a matter of matching detailed empirical evidence on population change to some general population theory which might render that change intelligible. Rather there are several overlapping layers of theory that require consideration. The events that population researchers typically study cannot be under-

stood when divorced from their wider contexts. Thus theories of society also inform demographic understandings. Furthermore, population theories that attempt to give shape to temporal change are at once both historical and philosophical. Thus philosophical theories of history, along with epistemological theories, form part of the theoretical underpinnings of population theory and should not be ignored. In advancing this argument, I have paid close attention to one particular example of population theory – demographic transition theory – and the controversy surrounding it. In the recent literature concerning this controversy, different authors have expressed remarkably different views on the presence (or absence) of theory in population studies. Their varied judgements arise, to a degree, from different conceptions of what constitutes a theory, but the differences of assessment can also be explained by the different attention that authors pay to different layers of theory. Recognising more explicitly the kinds of theory implicated in attempts at theory development within population studies can thus clarify not only the nature of the task in hand, but also some apparent contradictions in the current literature.

Inward-looking tendencies in population studies have militated against the proper recognition of these several layers of theory, and population geographers have hardly been more eclectic in their outlook. Demography, in particular, has been criticised for circumscribing the research agenda in such a way as to limit the input of ideas from other disciplines. The limitations of policy orientation and data-led research are also evident in some areas of population geography and it is hardly accidental that studies of migration, the part of population geography historically least influenced by demography's research agenda, have proved most open to new approaches. Disciplinary cultures thus remain important even within a multidisciplinary arena, with the attendant danger that dominant cultures may exercise greater influence over what is researched and how. I have suggested that, in such circumstances, population geography would do well to enhance its own identity as *geography* by re-engaging with wider debates in human geography and the social sciences

more generally. My concern has been not with where population geography is going (Noin, 1991) but with where it might go in the future, with possibilities rather than probabilities. This is not an argument in favour of one set of theoretical ideas over another, but an entreaty to population geographers to become more theoretically aware, critically reflective and involved.

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