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Review of *Demographic Structure and Evolution of a Peasant System: Guatemala* by John D. Early

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Demographic Structure and Evolution of a Peasant System: Guatemala. *John D. Early.* Boca Raton: University Presses of Florida, 1982, vii + 207 pp. \$20.00, cloth.

The Guatemalan peasant system of twenty to thirty years ago is rapidly changing into something else—not quite peasant-like and not quite industrial. The author uses demographic information in the form of birth and death registration (from 1877 on), as well as data from national censuses, to discuss the demographic transition and how it parallels Guatemala's socioeconomic evolution. The book is divided into six parts, of varying utility and interest, linked by the common theme of Guatemalan demography.

Part I outlines the objectives of the study: (1) to contribute to demographic methodology; (2) to sketch the demographic structure of Guatemala over the last thirty-odd years; and (3) to analyze the dynamics of the early part of the demographic transition, as manifested in Guatemala. Early also presents his theoretical perspective: rather weakly developed arguments that the constructs of demographic transition

and sociocultural evolution together yield something approaching theory.

Early then reviews the successive phases of the demographic transition: a high fertility—high mortality phase (I), high fertility—falling mortality (II), falling fertility—low mortality (III), and eventually low fertility—low mortality (IV), characteristic of modern Western populations. The author similarly sketches sociocultural evolution as a series of states (band-tribe-peasant-industrial-postindustrial) assumed by cultural systems in time, with no unilineal trajectory implied. It is not uncommon for demographers, sociologists, and anthropologists to extract sociocultural variables and to show how they impinge upon the dynamics of demographic structure, or vice versa. Early goes beyond this, however, in proposing the marriage of these two impoverished bodies of “theory.” He suggests that we examine more systematically the linkages between them, so that we can find explanations for changes in one system in the intrinsic dynamics of the other. Early's theoretical discussion, while provocative, is sparse and unsophisticated; the inner workings of his new

calculus are left undetailed. Perhaps this is because he intends this monograph to illustrate the utility of his theoretical hybrid.

Part II introduces the demographic data from Guatemala. Vital registration, evaluated to be of high quality (at least over the last forty years), is used to find and correct discrepancies in the census population figures for 1950, 1964, and 1973. Early makes similar adjustments in the numbers of Ladinos (descendants of European extraction) versus Mayan Indians. Interestingly, Early determines the 1950 census to be the most accurate, the 1973 census the least accurate. He also defines a social criterion for discriminating urban from rural units of analysis, since they usually have very different demographic structures. His methodology, then, consists of working from the known to the unknown, from quality information to estimates derived from poorer quality data.

From these revised data, Early derives demographic trends that have been reported elsewhere (Part III). For example, as the Guatemalan peasant system undergoes sociocultural change, crude death rates fall greatly, crude birth rates fall slightly, and these trends vary in predictable ways for Ladinos versus Indians and for rural versus urban areas. The accompanying tables provide comparability with similarly collected data from other countries. While they may be useful for predicting numbers of future television consumers or designing the most efficient form of conscription, such tables offer little insight into how the demographic transition proceeds at the local level.

Recognizing this, Early develops a time-transitory demographic picture of Santiago Atitlan, a predominantly Mayan village (Part IV). His provocative analyses nicely depict some of the mechanics of the interaction between sociocultural and demographic systems. Early considers the evolution of general mortality, infant and child mortality, and fertility as epidemics are eliminated, as cash incomes wax and wane, as land becomes more scarce, etc. The author reviews other village demographics and finds similar dynamics. Finally, he analyzes the relationship between acculturation (as Mayans adopt Ladino dress) and demographic parameters. Part IV is probably the most valuable for anthropologists and those interested in the pragmatics of development. This section also underscores the need for a

general access population library, since information obviously collected but not presented by Early cannot be extracted from the text.

The last substantive section, Part V, discusses several aspects of data collection. The author charges that Western demographers have been unable to see the dynamics of non-Western societies because they wear cultural blinders. Early also discusses the appropriate unit of analysis for population reporting as opposed to scientific investigation of population dynamics: if we are interested in anything more advanced than bookkeeping, then using heterogeneous nation-states as units of analysis may yield more noise than information. The power of this approach is amply demonstrated in Part IV.

Early concludes with a summary section describing the demography of a peasant system as it is affected by social phenomena such as access to urban areas and the introduction of medical facilities. While the author is successful in documenting the evolution of the demographic system, it remains difficult to associate this evolution with that of the entire sociocultural system. That is, the author generates post hoc arguments for demographic structural changes by referring to isolated social phenomena—just as historical demographers have done for the last few decades. Early's inability to relate the sociocultural and demographic systems, I suspect, stems from a failing of the field. Anthropology and sociology have not agreed upon a systematic vocabulary with which to summarize and describe sociocultural organization. Demographers, on the other hand, can speak of "crude death rates" and "total fertility measures," succinctly communicating information about the dynamics of a demographic system. Since it is difficult to describe the dynamics of change in a sociocultural structure, we are restricted to excerpting sociocultural factors which seem, in some select instances, to explain observed changes in demographic structure. This is, of course, perfectly admissible social science, although we must always strive for more.

This book deals with three provinces of Guatemalan demography of interest to perhaps three different target audiences. Population demographers may find most pertinent the sections on making bad data compatible with good and the philosophy of demography. Government planners and other collectors of gross demographic statistics may find the

chapter on the population structure of Guatemala most useful. Students of anthropology and development may find the discussion of village population dynamics more appropriate for their respective research and planning. But

all these audiences will be interested in evaluating the theoretical position from which Early views cause and effect in the sociocultural and demographic systems of evolving Guatemala.

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