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CHAIR IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT - ENVIRONMENT, ENERGY AND SOCIETY – ACADEMIC YEAR 2008-2009



Henri Leridon,
Emeritus Professor
at the *Institut
national d'études
démographiques*

Henri LERIDON

gave his inaugural lecture on
5 March 2009.

His course, entitled “Demography, the
end of the transition?”
began on 18 March 2009

Extracts from the inaugural lecture:

“Exactly 40 years ago, we experienced an event
that was both unique and decisive in the history
of mankind [...]: the world population growth
rate reached an all-time high – 2% per year –
before falling back again quite rapidly.

“[...] How can we be sure that a rate of 2%
had never been achieved in the past? Because
we can apply the laws of demography, most of
which were established between 1920 and
1960. Let me begin with the simplest law. In a
“closed” population, i.e. a population with no
inward or outward migration (as is the case for
the world population!) the growth rate is equal
to the difference between birth and death rates.
The question is therefore to determine these
rates for human populations through history.
To do so, we need either to have reliable
statistics on these populations, or to make
estimates based, among other things, on
biological factors. We can also combine the
two.

“[...] Another reason for believing that the
recent demographic trend is historically
unprecedented is that we now understand the
mechanisms involved. In practically all
societies, mortality has declined, but without an
immediate corresponding decrease in birth
rates. It is this process of *demographic
transition* which will form the main thread of
my lectures. In short, world population growth
in the second half of the twentieth century
– from 2.5 to 6 billion inhabitants – is a
consequence of progress and economic
development in today’s most industrialized
countries, which have “exported” a part of
their success in combating mortality to the less
developed world. Because the fertility decline in
developing countries has sometimes been much
slower (it has barely begun in some parts of
Africa), the time lag between changes in
mortality and fertility led to a period of rapid
population growth that peaked in the 1960s.

“[...] World population trends over the last 100
years have thus been exceptional. If we reason in
absolute terms, growth is following a potentially
alarming pattern. Planet Earth counted an
additional 75 million inhabitants each year in the
years 1970-90, and this figure is only now
starting to decline. For Africa, the continent
which today posts the highest growth rates, the
population will increase from 800 million to 2
billion in just 50 years, after doubling in 25 years.
It was such figures that sparked the concerns first
voiced in the late 1950s and in the following
decade. The issue took a new turn with the
publication in 1968 of *The Population Bomb*
by the entomologist Paul Ehrlich and his wife
Anne, and triggered global debate in 1972 with
The Limits to Growth by Donella and Dennis
Meadows. The central theme of these two
works, and the focus of their concern, was the
rapid and ultimately unsustainable pace of
population growth.

“[...] But times have changed, and the debate
must now shift away from the issue of
“overpopulation”. To start with, the 6.6 billion
inhabitants of the Earth are here to stay. It is
more urgent to feed them and offer them decent
living conditions than to argue about numbers.
Second, the fertility decline is already well
advanced: the mean number of children per
woman has fallen from 5 to 2.7. In other words,
we are already 80% along the road towards the
“replacement level” of 2.2, which may be
reached by 2030. In fact, in many industrialized
countries, there is a real fear of demographic
decline, and debate about the risks of excessive
population growth has become irrelevant.

“[...] But whether we accept an extensive or
restrictive version of sustainable development,
there is no doubt that our societies will need to
adapt to new constraints and adjust their frame
of reference. We will have to change our eating
habits, our modes of consumption (of energy
especially), drastically reduce pollution levels, and
so on [...]. And we must ensure that humankind
remains central to the overall debate. We too
often tend to forget that the economy exists to
serve the needs of people and not the other way
round. Development must be sustainable to
enable future generations to live decently on our
planet, not simply to restore the Earth to some
indefinable and utopian ‘natural’ state.” ■

The Chair is supported by Total.



*The inaugural lecture is
available from Editions
Fayard. The video is
available in French and
English on the Collège de
France website.*