

Demographic transition in the caribbean



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In Sociology there are numerous theories that we use to explain, analyze and define populations, one of these theories being the Demographic Transition Theory, developed primarily by Warren Thompson of Sweden. This theory was initially used to trace the transition of European society's population from primitive communism to nineteenth century capitalism it dealt with demographic and social change throughout the European historical landscape. According to Jackson and Hudman (1986) the rate of population growth in some countries, particularly industrialized ones, followed a pattern of increase and then decline. The experience of rapid population growth rates is referred to as demographic transition. The demographic transition theory consists of four stages: Stage one the High Fluctuating where the birth and death rate are high, Stage two the Early Expanding period of industrialization where birth rate remains the same but death rates fall dramatically, Stage three the Late Expanding cultural and economic factors influence population change and Stage four the Low Fluctuating both birth and death rate are low negative population growth occurs.

These stages can be applied to many European and industrialized societies for example Great Britain and France. However George Roberts, a Jamaican demographer, suggests that due to slavery there are five stages of demographic transition in the British Caribbean. These stages are much more suited to describing changes in the Caribbean population because it takes into consideration our historical past. The first stage has to do with the period of early enslavement in the early eighteenth century Caribbean islands gained a population due to slaves being imported from Africa by Europeans who depended on the slaves as a labour force to produce sugar in

their plantations. The population consisted of a small population of whites (the plantation owners and their families), a large majority of slaves and the remaining minute amount of indigenous people who were previously killed out by the Europeans. During this period the process of “seasoning” took place in which the Whites use their controlling position to instill their culture and institutions onto the slaves through acculturation.

When transitioning to stage two we see the view on slavery begin to change as political figures began to promote an end to the slave trade, this period spans between the late eighteenth century and Emancipation at which point in time slaves were actually freed. During this time a new group emerged within the population who were known as the mulatos or browns and they occupied the ranks in between the plantation owner and the slave. According to M. G Smith the relationship between these groups within Caribbean society were inherently plural due to animosity harboured by each group. The majority population resided on the plantations except for freed slaves, mulatos, the few remaining Amerindians and escaped slaves.

In Jamaica runaway slaves known as maroons escaped to the mountainous areas of the island and formed independent settlements that are still apparent in the present. Economically emancipation occurred due to sugar losing its economical pull due to the discovery of beet sugar and further industrialization in Europe. Due to our reliance on sugar as a means of income this crippled Caribbean economies. Caribbean societies began to see changes within their social structure. Islands like the Barbados and the Leeward Islands were led by representations from the planter class who given permission from their governments to engage in legislative

procedures. Islands like Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica became crown colonies ruled by a governor that held the majority of power. This was also the period of indentureship in a few of the Caribbean where workers were bought in from India and China to replace the newly freed slaves.

A trader class could be seen quickly developing as the indentured labourers moved from the plantations and began opening shops in the major cities that were beginning to develop. These cities tended to be focused around coastal areas because of availability of the ports (for example the city of Port-of-Spain which is the capital of Trinidad and Tobago and is where the majority of economic trade and commerce takes place) and the already surrounding plantations which were also developed close to the ports due to the ease of access. These areas and their outlying peripheries was where the majority of modernization and urbanization took place due to them being the main centers of trade and commerce on the islands. The less accessible rural areas tended to be somewhat neglected in terms of structural development and focused more on agriculture as an economic means. In terms of population during this time period we saw large increase in the African and Indian population which scholars attribute to their cultural histories.

The East Indians had a very patriarchal view on family which promoted large extended families in which men were the head of the household and which naturally led to an increase in the East Indian population. The African saw a dramatic increase their population due to their matrifocal views on family which promotes in fertility which they were now given freedom to exercise. This led to single parent mothers ran households alone with many illegitimate children and what were known as visiting fathers. We also saw a

decline in whites on the islands an effect of white moving back to Europe due to the attractions of industrialization. These societies then developed onto the fourth stage of demographic transition which occurred during 1880 to 1921.

Due to changes within social changes in Europe we began to see political infrastructure changes within West Indian countries. The spread of communism and world war one were proving more prominent and demanding than the West Indies which Europe was losing to anyway. This gave rise to anti-white sentiments and black consciousness which led to calls for equality and better living conditions. These were met in part by the ruling whites and led to improvements in health and allowed for an increase in the life expectancy of the non-white population. Finally in the stages of demographic transition we have the fifth stage which started in 1991 and is still occurring in the present. Religious culture at this period in Caribbean development promoted high family values this along with economic reform and international aid that provided higher level of sanitation and physical infrastructure (hospitals buildings, telephones and communication) led to elevated birth rates and a lowering of death rates which then led to an increase in population. This is concurrent with stage two in the development which saw similar type of figures. Some Caribbean demographic transitions are also in accordance with stage three of European demographic transition where birth rates are also on the decline and projected population growth rates are very small.

One example of the islands is Barbados who is ranked high on the HDI scale and has been very successful in the promoting of birth control. With

Caribbean islands in this stage of development a large majority of the population live in urban areas as white collar jobs are seen as more desirable this is due largely in part to European acculturation of socio economic norms and value systems and globalization in terms of world economies and media representations of desirable jobs. Demographic transition in the Caribbean takes into consideration of eventful history to help in the analysis and understanding of the demographic stages in our past. The European demographic transition theory did not take into consideration Caribbean social reality and was therefore ineffective when it came to describing our society. Factors such as slavery, unique immigration and cultural practices all affected the Caribbean's population as it developed to the developing nations that they are today.