CHAPTER 2

PRETRANSITIONAL POPULATION CONTROL AND EQUILIBRIUM

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On the issue of the cultural control of family size before the fertility transition, most demographers appear to disagree with many of those cultural anthropologists with whose work they are most likely to be familiar. Typifying the demographer’s stance, van de Walle (1968b, p. 489) wrote: “Control of marital fertility by contraception, as we know it today in Western countries, is without doubt a fairly recent development.” He went on to conclude that the typical pattern for most of the world’s population had for aeons been one of early marriage followed by uncontrolled fertility. A similar conclusion was drawn by Knodel (1977, p. 242), who decided that birth control must have been adopted by the vast majority of mankind only fairly recently and that its practice was innovative.

Some anthropologists and anthropological demographers have sounded a different note, louder in the late 1960s and 1970s than currently, but still influential. Thus Handwerker (1983, p. 5) reported that most anthropologists assume that birth and death rates were low throughout most of human history, and Polgar (1971b, p. 3) argued that “There are several lines of evidence indicating that the voluntary regulation of family size may well have been one of the earliest features of human culture.” In a similar vein, Greenhalgh (1995b, p. 15) wrote: “people without access to modern contraception take steps to limit family size,” and Bledsoe and Camara (1997), emphasizing that Gambian women ensured that too many pregnancies, births, and children did not weaken them, implied that there must have been ancient ways of avoiding an excessively large family.

This review will attempt to show how it was possible that such contrasting conclusions could have been reached from the same human experience, and will search for a resolution. Although some theoretical anthropological ecologists and biologists assert that this debate is now history (see Maynard Smith 1964, 1976; Wood 1998), prominent field anthropologists often disagree. For example, to counter Wood’s (1998) claim that belief in premodern fertility control was now

There are some obvious reasons for the different conclusions, but they are far from the whole story. Anthropologists tend to focus on the limitation of population and family size, which includes abortion as well as contraception, and infanticide as well as fertility control, while demographers, if they could obtain the data, would count infanticide on both sides of the vital-events ledger, as births contributing to fertility and as deaths contributing to mortality. In addition, as Weiss (1976, p. 351) charged, demographers are usually not interested in small societies.

Anthropologists concerned with long-term fertility patterns focus on hunter-gatherers. They now make up an insignificant proportion of the world’s population, but in 10,000 BC they constituted the whole of it, although there were only about 10 million of them altogether (Lee and DeVore 1968, p. 5 and frontispiece). The present-day survivors are used to provide evidence about how their distant ancestors behaved, an approach with significant dangers.

In contrast to the way they differ over the cultural control of fertility, anthropologists and demographers are in agreement that, for most of human history, populations have been very close to being stationary or in a condition of equilibrium and that birth rates and death rates have been almost identical. In fact there is little room for disagreement because the mathematics of exponential growth show that any persistent margin of birth rates over death rates would have resulted in far greater population growth than has actually occurred. Most demographers assume that this balance of births and deaths was Malthusian, with mortality holding down fertility’s potential for population growth. Most anthropologists rarely mention Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834) except to claim that premodern man was sufficiently resourceful to bypass his constraints.

The anthropologists’ neglect of Malthus when focusing on premodern populations is unfortunate, because in the first edition of his Essay, in 1798, he analysed the nature of this age-old equilibrium. Postulating a constant passion between the sexes, he argued that it normally led to so many births that population would have grown had it not been constrained by mortality driven by a shortage of food, the production of which had grown slowly, if at all, for most of human history.

Since the beginning of the anthropological analysis of population stasis, essentially starting with the biologist, Carr-Saunders (1922), that view has often been taken to mean that a population in Malthusian equilibrium was constantly on the verge of starvation, weakening both the people and their society. But in fact much of the mortality constraint on premodern hunter-gatherers took the form of violent deaths, mostly in warfare, and possibly accounting for as much as 30 percent of the mortality of males (Coleman 1986, p. 29). Indeed, that deaths unconnected with starvation may protect the rest of the society by helping to maintain its resources is conceded by those anthropologists with a focus on infanticide. It was not Malthus’s view that the mortality arising from insufficient food usually took the form of starvation, except in famine crises, nor what his type of equilibrium