

## Comment and Controversy

The Editors:

### **“Ready, Willing, and Able”: Ansley J. Coale, 1917–2002**

The voluntary limitation of fertility within marriage should be regarded as one of the most significant achievements in the history of mankind. At the General Conference of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP) held in Liège in 1973, Princeton demographer Ansley J. Coale specified that three pre-conditions had to be fulfilled before a specific population would embrace that practice: (1) The idea of fertility regulation had to become part of the “calculus of conscious choice”; (2) limiting the size of a family had to be perceived as being advantageous; and (3) people had to have the knowledge and means to practice contraception. In the international literature, his specifications soon became known as the “ready, willing, and able” formula. It is striking how well these three adjectives are also suited to describe Coale as a person and a population scientist.

Coale was an extremely able and broadly trained scholar. In his junior and senior years at Princeton, he complemented his upper-class courses in economics with upper-class courses in mathematics and physics, but studied modern European history and English language as well. His technical and modeling skills as a demographer were without parallel. Originally an economist, he became involved in population directly because of his willingness to accept a challenge. Frank Notestein, who later became a close friend, succeeded in luring him as a Milbank Fellow to the Office of Population Research in Princeton, which he had recently founded. The same spirit of adventure stimulated him, as a young naval officer during the War, to complete a course in radio engineering at Harvard. He learned that skill so well that he was qualified to teach in MIT’s radar program thereafter.

Coale saw important challenges in all of his great research projects, which rightly made his name world famous. He collabo-

rated with Edgar M. Hoover in an important study on population growth and economic development in low-income countries, and launched Princeton's path-breaking study on the demographic transition in Europe. His willingness to serve the international demographic community as evaluator, advisor, administrator, and referee became readily apparent—notably in his crucial, long-standing support for the reference journal *Population Index* and his acceptance of the vice presidency (1973–1977) and presidency (1977–1981) of the IUSSP.

As a world-class scholar and a gifted teacher, Coale deeply influenced the development of demography during the postwar period. He emphasized the statistical and mathematical aspects of the discipline, and many international colleagues willingly supported him in that preference. The construction of model life tables and stable populations, the estimation of basic demographic measures from incomplete data, and the modeling of biological phenomena, of marriage curves, and of similar graphs had his particular interest. These endeavors became so fashionable that, for a time, the discipline seemed to lose contact with researchers dealing with such sociological and anthropological aspects of population change as international migration, the integration of migrants, gender, and poverty, for example.

The pendulum swung back, however, and I have no doubt that Coale himself always kept an eye open on the importance of historical and cultural factors. The book that he and Susan Cotts Watkins edited in 1986—*The Decline of Fertility in Europe: The Revised Proceedings of a Conference on the Princeton European Fertility Project* (Princeton, 1986)—testifies to the breadth of his outlook. It is a rich source of historical data on fertility change and marriage patterns in nearly 600 European provinces. In one passage, he interjected a personal remark that showed remarkable foresight: “It is more likely, in my opinion, that if marriage remains a much less than universally chosen institution, and if women continue to gain their rightful equal opportunities for rewarding lives outside of the home, the TFR [total fertility rate] will continue well below two.”

Coale inspired great loyalty in his students. Many seemed to have adopted him as a surrogate father. They would invariably praise his patience, his generosity with time, and his continuing support for them in their later careers. He also stimulated them to

be active internationally; several of them are now leading figures in the profession. At international meetings, he would, from time to time, display the directness and candor commonly attributed to Americans. He could sometimes be seen slowly to shake his head in despair when, as a chairman, he felt an intervention was wide of the mark. But he was so free of prejudice and so cosmopolitan that he maintained excellent contacts all over the globe.

He and his wife Sue were frequent visitors to Europe. I flatter myself that they must also have counted Flanders and The Netherlands among their favorite places. One Sunday afternoon he called from Amsterdam to say that they had used their accumulated frequent flyer points to cross the Atlantic and visit the *Rijksmuseum*. My wife and I invited them to come to The Hague for dinner. They were wonderful company—erudite, experienced, and utterly free of pretence. He and I were allowed to talk shop for a while. He was clearly intent on learning more about demographic research activities in The Netherlands and especially at the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI), the demographic institute that I then directed. When I explained that the competition for research funds in the Netherlands often amounted to “picking the winners by consensus,” he looked at me in disbelief. His competitive spirit was so strong that he could hardly imagine trying to get all of his colleagues to support a broad research program, let alone having to share his best research ideas with them. From his perspective, good ideas were a researcher’s treasure; the most important duty was to carry them out as soon as practicable. Presumably, he lived by that adage, and for a man of his brilliance, curiosity, intellectual talents, and persistence, to be a researcher was to live well.

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