

The Descent of Human Sex Ratio at Birth

A Dialogue between Mathematics, Biology
and Sociology

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FOREWORD

This book has been written for the critical attention of researchers who rarely work together: mathematicians, biologists, historians, philosophers, social scientists and historians of the sciences. Its object – how close the numerical ratio of the two sexes at birth may come to some regularity – is in fact almost three centuries old, which is more than the collective memory of any of these disciplines or the individual consciousness of the specialist scholar can generally envisage. But whether we like it or not, if the conclusion were to be drawn tomorrow that a fairly stable proportion could be measured (perhaps the proportion of the two sexes, perhaps another), then it would be one of the epistemological registers examined in our enquiry that would come into play. Sometimes figures seem to have too much to say for themselves; they happen to give off the musty smell of theology, to lead readers towards the evasion of phenomena that are actually relevant, to draw them into the twists and turns of uncontrolled philosophies of history and philosophies of sciences. . . It then falls to those who have made science their profession to exercise a threefold control over figures: control through the technical coherence of formal methods of calculation, control by matching the conceptual analytical devices to the object as studied, and control through the relevance of the intellectual genealogies that these methods and these concepts involve. Clearly, since the book will be read from the point of view of more than one discipline, these controls will be exercised in different ways. This does not matter, as long as, when all is said and done, this threefold control remains manifestly cogent every time.

The plan for this book arose when several contextual factors came together. At the end of the academic year 2002–2003, following discussions held at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Berlin (the *Wissenschaftskolleg*), we were left wanting to go further into a dialogue between the social sciences and the biological sciences. We felt it was indispensable to locate objects likely to stimulate such encounters (like the analysis of the proportion of the two sexes) and then move on to take a serious look at

previous states of tension between the disciplines around these objects – tensions that might be both very old and very much alive. All these things would be difficult to put across in a symposium, much easier to introduce through a book. A book could also draw on re-examinations of research on the history of social sciences in the 18th and 20th centuries, in which we had recently taken part. Finally, a book would be able to respond to a critical set of circumstances peculiar to the social sciences by suggesting the possibility of a new conception of the long historicity of the sciences, and consequently the opportunity for re-examination at the borders of other disciplines, most particularly where mathematical thinking or biological facts are involved. At this point, our project received the attention and encouragement of Daniel Courgeau and Robert Franck: without them, the methodological purpose of this study would probably not have found the more favourable conditions that have allowed it to take the concrete form of a book.

The *Descent of human sex ratio at birth* follows and extends another book that we prepared together, in which several other authors also collaborated: the critical edition of a very little-known text published in 1936 by Maurice Halbwachs and Alfred Sauvy, *Le Point de vue du nombre* (published by INED, Paris, 2005). In parallel, we have also written a sociological work that aims to define the stochastic nature of social phenomena through a case study: *Le Sexisme de la première heure* (Raisons d’agir, Paris, 2007). Between them, these three works are interrelated in the same way as – to evoke a famous precedent on which we shall comment later – the Introduction to the *Théorie analytique des probabilités* (1812) and the *Essai philosophique sur les probabilités* (1814). Some elements of the first are taken up and extended in the later works. However, each has a different objective: *Le Point de vue du nombre* (2005) gives an account of a collective scholarly enquiry, addressed to historians of the social sciences; with *Le Sexisme de la première heure* (2007), arguments are presented to social scientists in favour of identifying a new sociological object and demonstrating the relevance of a new approach; and here, methodical thinking that crosses several disciplines – different forms of mathematics, biology, the social sciences – is submitted to the judgment of specialists and of epistemologists. The three volumes together come from the same work in progress, a project whose aim is the reflexive re-examination of the social sciences.

After our stay in Berlin, several stages in our research were discussed within an institutional triangle in Paris, marked out by the beacons of the *Institut national d’études démographiques* (the National Institute for

Demographic Studies - INED), the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* (the School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences - EHESS) and the completely new *École d'économie de Paris* (the Paris School of Economics - PSE). Discussions with our colleagues at the *Centre Maurice-Halbwachs* (CNRS-EHESS-ENS-UCBN-EEP) and the *History and Populations* research unit (INED) were always particularly fruitful. In addition, the publication of this book, and notably its translation, would not have been possible without INED funding and without the support of its Director, François Héran, himself active in these scientific discussion networks. We are also very grateful to Karen George for the quality of her work in translating and fine-tuning the English manuscript, and for the relevant exchanges that we had with her in the course of this work. Finally, Catriona Dutreuilh, Translation Coordinator at INED, and Evelien Bakker, Associate Publishing Editor for Social Sciences at Springer, followed the preparation of this publication considerably and efficiently. We hope that everyone who has played a direct or indirect part in the preparation of this book will find that its publication brings echoes of the intense moments we have shared – which, for us, were indispensable.

Paris, October 2006

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