POPULATION STATISTICS IN THE CHANGING CONTEXT: 
AN OVERVIEW OVER THE FIRST 150 YEARS OF ITALY

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Population statistics in the changing context: an overview over the first 150 years of Italy.

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Abstract The paper aims to provide an overview of the different stages of Italian history underlying the relations between population statistics and the changes occurring in demographic behaviour since the unification of Italy. In this sense, a crucial point is the role played by institutional organisations and their specific choices in terms of the production of official statistics. The analysis is divided into five different historical periods: from Italian unification to the First World War; the period between the two wars, from World War II to the Sixties; the Seventies; the last thirty years. In the first decades after unification, the relationship between academic and official statistics was particularly relevant. The institutional structure led to the enhancement of “political arithmetic” as a tool for the administration of the new state, with the aim of describing the essential features of the population’s dynamics and resources. This perspective was strengthened between the two World Wars, a period that coincides almost entirely with Fascism. At the same time, we can observe a process of convergence between sophisticated scientific demography and the population policies implemented in the Fascist regime.

After World War II, the availability of institutional data focused mainly on economic dynamics. The subsequent major transformations in the field of family and fertility behaviour (e.g. the baby boom, divorce, internal migration) pushed for further developments in population studies, although sources of data remained substantially unchanged in the last decades. Starting from the Seventies, methodological and scientific progress led to a rethinking of the creation of data. Following the line traced by the paradigm shift (from macro to micro), a new phase of data collection started with the implementation of national socio-demographic sample surveys and the access to Istat microdata. In the last thirty years, demographic changes have seen further acceleration. Italy has become a country of immigration, fertility has continued to fall and life paths have become more and more complex. At the same time, scientific research has made great strides and new explanatory approaches have been introduced in the last few years. Both these aspects require more detailed and more frequent information, an increasing demand that is not satisfied by the availability of data.

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1 Introduction

From Unification to today, the Italian population has undergone profound transformations. From monarchy to republic, from farming society to post-industrial society, from country of illiterates to country of education spread far and wide among social classes and genders, from poor country to rich country, from country of emigration to country of immigration. Simply in terms of numbers, the population has more than doubled overall, passing from less than 26 million in 1861 (within the current borders) to 61 million today. This evolution can be read, classified into eras and phases and interpreted also through the evolution and history of public statistics which are developed at the same time as, or in many cases following, socio-demographic changes through the design of new demands for knowledge.

Over the past 150 years, socio-demographic analysis has progressively had to develop in order to capture and study the truly radical changes in events and behaviours. These changes, concerning both life styles and qualitative changes in cultural representation, have broadened the field of study (and observation and analysis methods) to adapt reconstructions and empirical readings to the complexity of the phenomena. The development of quantitative analysis methods, the birth and development of new demographic theories and the development of suitable substantive disciplines on which demographic interpretation tends to be based, underline the need to design and gather statistics on the population and its behaviour that continuously seek to respond to the new demands for interpreting the dynamics in progress. If we look at the evolution of official statistics in Italy, we can understand how "demographic statistics", and thus demography, have in some eras played a highly important role, starting from the 19th century recognition of political arithmetic as a method of good government of public spheres. The application of the quantitative method based on the collection of aggregate data to understand population figures and structures led throughout the 20th century to the progressive autonomy of demography. Moving away from the mere application of statistics, and after the strong integration and concordance between public statistics and demography between the 1920s and 30s the two areas became progressively and more markedly detached over time (De Sandre and Favero, 2003).

This work sets out to provide an overview of the different phases of Italian history starting from the Unification of Italy, underlining the relations between population statistics and the changes in socio-demographic dynamics and the legislative framework. In this sense, the role of the institutional organisations and their specific choices in terms of the production of official statistics are particularly important. We have chosen to divide the last 150 years into five different periods:

1. From 1861 to World War I (1861-1915);
2. The years between the wars (1915-1945);
3. The period after World War II (from 1945 to the 1960s);
4. The 1970s;
5. From the 1980s until today.
2 From the Unification of Italy until World War I (1861-1915)

At the end of the 19th century Italy was still mainly a farming country. The early stages of industrialisation came late to the peninsula compared to other European and non-European countries (Cameron, 2005). It was above all the North-West region that saw the first approaches to industry (starting from Savoyan Piedmont, in which Cavour was an attentive promoter also of official Italian statistics), while in all other regions the rural population remained in highly underdeveloped conditions. The gap between the North and the South (which was still linked to *latifundia*) was very wide in the 1800s, also due to the political fragmentation of the peninsula: unity opened horizons for potentially more favourable conditions (Armengaud et al., 1971, 545) which however were not sufficiently exploited. The extension of the Piedmont legislation and economic policy to all areas of the territory had very different repercussions, in particular the issues of the South not only did not find a solution but the burden of such problems was maintained and indeed increased (Bedeschi, 2002).

From a demographic point of view, post-unification Italy experimented on one hand a sharp decrease in (particularly infant) mortality, with a progressive increase in life expectancy, from approximately 30 years in the first decade after unification to around 45 in 1910, on the other hand a later but slower decline in fertility: the average number of children per woman settled to around 5 and gradually dropped in the following decades starting from the North-Western regions. The strong population growth deriving from these demographic dynamics, which was particularly intense in rural areas, led to high emigration: between 1861 and 1911 almost 4 million emigrants were recorded. Education levels were low, and evolving very slowly: in 1861 male illiteracy stood at 74%, female illiteracy at 84% (Cameron, 2005, p. 339). The school system was governed by the Casati Law of 1859, extended to the Kingdom (and remaining in place until the Gentile Law of 1923), with state education, funded by the municipalities, being compulsory and free for the first two years of primary school; the compulsory nature was not however endorsed until 1877, when it was also extended to the first three years. In 1911, 55% of the active population still worked in agriculture, 30% in industry and transport, 5% in trade (Armengaud et al, 1971).

The unification of the newly formed Kingdom led to the promotion of "political arithmetic" to describe the essential dynamics and resources of the population, mainly for the purposes of state administration. The measurement of demographic phenomena using aggregate data was seen as an essential element for understanding resources and as a basis for policies for the promotion of economic development. Cavour, previously a member of the High Commission for Statistics established in Turin in 1836, was particularly sensitive to the central and peripheral structure of the official statistics body.

The "General Statistical Office" founded in 1861 by the minister Filippo Cordova at the MAIC was in charge of managing the works across the whole Italian territory, establishing the principle that "the most absolute concentration of directing the works lay in the very nature of the statistics service" (ISTAT, n.d., p.34; Lombardo 1994).
The first and most absorbing operation of the new office was precisely the organisation of the first population census (established by Royal Decree of 8 September 1861), called for 31 December 1861. The census operations, which aimed to ascertain the inhabitants actually living in the municipalities of the Kingdom by drawing up a current list of names, were unexpectedly efficient and saw the full collaboration of all the local authorities, who were provided with all the means necessary to overcome the practical difficulties, arising mostly from the illiteracy of more than two thirds of the population. The existence of the already re-named Division of General Statistics however suffered from a number of quite serious limits, both due to its position within an (admittedly important) Ministry, which objectively created difficulties in horizontal coordination (with other Ministries) and due equally to problems of vertical coordination linked first and foremost to the still-problematic transmission of data between the peripheral provincial councils (which in turn coordinated the municipalities) and the central Division (D’Autilia and Melis, 2000).

The efforts to assure the organic unity and state centrality of the collection of statistical data, including that concerning the status and movement of the population, fell under the responsibility of Pietro Maestri from 1862 despite alternating interactions, not always collaborative and not always offering the required economic or organisational assistance, with the initiatives of politicians who came. Led by Maestri, a second demographic census was organised in 1871, which was of great importance for a number of specifically demographic reasons: the recognition of the principle of ten-yearly censuses; the acquisition of the legal value for the state and its administration of the municipal and provincial population figures verified in the Census; the establishment of municipal population records based on the new census and the publication of annual summaries; the establishment of records of Italians abroad.

The census was increasingly recognised as one of the fundamental bases of government activities and the implementation of the first two censuses in the Kingdom undoubtedly marked the conclusion of a long period of organisational building of relations between the peripheral data collection structures and the central body, for which the records of the population and their movements represent one of the most successful actions, above all in terms of establishing and imposing uniform data collection criteria in the different provinces.

With the appointment of Luigi Bodio to the General Statistics Directorate (1883), a happy solution was found to the problem of centralised coordination of statistical data collection by all Ministries, then assigned to the Statistical Council comprising ministerial representatives and statistics experts (De Sandre and Favero, 2003).

Having acquired greater autonomy, the Directorate issued a huge wealth of demographic publications thanks also to the pressure of the non-political members of the Council and the Higher Statistics Board (CSS, founded in 1882) within the Directorate (Messedaglia and Mantegazza among others). The increase in institutional attention to the problems of the population was connected, also internationally and scientifically, to the debate deriving from the revitalisation of the Malthusian theories and their effects on the links between population and the economy.

The 1870s and 80s saw the crowning of an organisational project which brought state statistics to a fairly stable level of services, indeed becoming one of the fundamental activities of the central administration. This particularly fruitful period
saw the continuous exchange between the organisation of state statistical data collection services and the continuing cultural and scientific debate around the results of the gathered data, which fuelled much of the national and international consensus involving not only politicians and administrators but also the academic world.

The Annals bear witness to the abundance of this activity: between 1878 and 1898, 139 volumes were published. Among others, worthy of note are the studies of Luigi Perozzo (1880, 1881) on the classification of the Italian population by age, the height curves of military recruits, and on mortality; Del Vecchio's work on marriage between blood relatives and its effects; Rameri's studies on the populations of the compartments; Statistics on the cause of death from 1882; and the so-called Jacini Inquiry on the health and hygiene conditions of the municipalities of the Kingdom (1991-1886) which produced a vivid photograph not only of the underdeveloped condition of the vast rural populations but also a clear analysis of the differences in regulatory and value structures in the different territories which guided both marriage and pre-transitional reproductive behaviour.

Towards the end of the 1880s the Dirstat budget was reduced and in the following decade Italian official statistics entered a deep crisis, many of the surveys begun in the previous decade were suspended, there were fewer and less frequent publications, and the 1891 census was even cancelled due to lack of funds (Ipsen, 1997).

In the early years of the 1900s the debate started to focus on the new dynamics in play, including the growth of urbanisation and the first hints towards a drop in birth rates. These issues, which basically linked demography to key topics of social analysis, were developed above all in a neo-nationalist key; interdisciplinary debate increasingly took on ideological connotations for and against the neo-Malthusian practices which started to become popular above all in urban fields (Ipsen, 1996; Treves, 2002). Among others, the references run from Mortara and Benini's studies on the spread of neo-Malthusian behaviour, Livi's studies on the Jews, Gini's work on the differences between the sexes and the demographic factors of the evolution of nations.

The early 1900s bore witness to the dispersion of the national statistical structure's energy and functions. Despite the efforts of ministers Luigi Luzzati and Francesco Saverio Nitti, the attempts to reform the statistical system were interrupted by World War I and achieved poor results during the post-war period. Only prior to the 1911 census did the government restructure the functions: the new director Giovanni Montemartini indicated new methods which surpassed classic statistics, involving field investigations, as well as a new organisation of the central and peripheral structures, but the experience was interrupted with his early death in 1913, in the lee of the Great War.

By this time debate focused mainly on emigration and the possibility to colonise new African territories. Attempts had been made to control the emigratory phenomenon since the start of the new century, and 1901 saw the establishment of the General Commission for Emigration (CGE) which had the task of monitoring, protecting and controlling emigration. In fact, while on one hand attempts were made to protect emigrants from unscrupulous recruitment agents, on the other hand, particularly in the war period, the need for recruits led the government to issue “nulla osta”, permits required to obtain a passport and therefore emigrate.
3 Between World War I and World War II

In the first half of the 20th century the decline in birth rates, linked first and foremost to the spread of birth control, was perceived as a threat to the power and prosperity of the nation. During the first decades of the 20th century, the massive emigratory flows which had begun in the last decades of the previous century, and which were originally interpreted as a phenomenon that compensated the high demographic growth, became a social evil, generating demographic imbalances and thus to be strictly channelled, if not limited. In Italy the Fascist government became an avid supporter of a pro-birth vision, the fundamental aims of which were to increase the population (the objective was to take the number of Italians from 40 to 60 million by mid-century), limit emigration to foreign countries and populate reclaimed areas and Italian colonies in Africa. To achieve these objectives, policies were issued that increasingly targeted demographic issues. The R.D.L. (Royal Decree Law) no. 1542 of 21 August 1937 was the most organic attempt to target birth rates, given that for the Grand Council of Fascism “the demographic problem, being the problem of life and its continuation, is in fact the problem of problems” (cit. from Volpi, 1989, pages 111-112). A whole range of population policies were passed aiming to directly increase the number of births, including loans to couples under 26 at the date of marriage, in this two-fold case aiming to support the creation of new family units and lower the age of marriage; tax deductions proportionate to the number of children; special provisions for state employees linked to the number of children; rules for the protection of female staff working in state administrations during pregnancy and early motherhood; a celibacy tax.

Further provisions aimed to hinder internal movements and in particular urbanisation, in the belief that the cities were responsible for the development of more favourable environments for the fast spread of a mentality limiting the number of births. However, despite the efforts made by the Fascist government, birth rates continued to fall. During this period more than others, fertility passed through the spread of behaviour linked to individuals and couples which contrasted strongly both with the legal system in force and the set of traditional ethics (De Sandre, 2005). The interest towards population growth required first of all a more analytical knowledge of its size and natural and migratory dynamics. This in turn required an improvement in the official information system. The national statistical system was reorganised, leading in 1926 to the birth of the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). With an initial annual budget of 2 million lira and with Corrado Gini at the helm of the CSS (the Management of ISTAT was established only in 1929), ISTAT set out to be, at least in the intentions of its founders, the "tool for government action in the present and the future" (Annali di Statistica, VI, 2, pages 17-18, cit. from Ipsen, 1997) and not by chance was placed directly under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, centralising all services.

"Demographic statistics" held a key position within the renewed body. Indeed one of the main tasks of ISTAT was, through the production of demographic data, to measure the effectiveness of population policies and to indicate the areas on which to concentrate efforts in order to bring improvements. Parallel to the birth of the new institute, staff training was also stimulated through the creation of new "Statistics
Schools within universities, as an integral part of the courses running in Political Science and Law faculties, including the availability of scholarships.

From a scientific viewpoint, areas of research multiplied and statistical methodology was significantly developed. While mortality analysis was by now consolidated, new methodological approaches to the study of fertility (Del Chiario, Gini), in dynamic population models (logistics curves, Lotka models) moved towards an increasingly more specific and disaggregated use of data and a reconstruction of the fundamental information sources for demographic analysis. During this period scientific committees and associations sprung up with significant public funding, contributing to the debate on the data collection and analysis methods and on population theories. Among the most active it is essential to mention the Italian Committee for Population Studies (CISP) founded in 1928 and the Consultation Committee for Population Studies (CCSP), established in 1937 under the leadership, respectively, of Corrado Gini and Livio Livi, two eminent scholars who covered positions of primary importance also within the National Institute of Statistics. These committees dealt with cyclical population theories, differential fertility by social class, biological bases of childbearing behaviour, population optimums, links between demography and socio-economic performance.

Generally speaking, we can state that the influence of the interests of the political class on scientific production in the field of demography has never been as strong as it was during the Fascist period. Progress in research mainly followed the government's populationist and birthist vision: research was published on large families, the municipalities with demographic declines by agricultural areas, and the Annals also published documentation on the regulatory and administrative action promoted by the government to assure demographic increase (De Sandre and Favero, 2003, p.33).

Particular importance was given to migration towards the African colonies and internal colonisation as well as the negative effect of migration on fertility. Although far more important phenomena in terms of numbers, studies on migration towards other countries and internal migration, particularly from the countryside to the cities, were progressively abandoned, soon disappearing completely from scientific debate.

However, despite the "Italian school" approach which unreservedly accepted and promoted the advantages of a numerous, growing population, with deeply pro-birthist undertones, the Fascist period saw a significant improvement in the quality of Italian statistics precisely due to the interest of the government which also led to increased funding (Ipsen, 1997). 1927 saw the start of a number of monthly publications including, from July 1928, the "Notiziario demografico"; statistical volumes were again published on population movement statistics and on the causes of death, which had been suspended in 1923; a reform was introduced, promoted by the Statistics Institute, establishing a periodical succession of general demographic and economic censuses; within the 1931 census, there was also a survey on the fertility of Italian married

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3 One of the first tasks of the ISTAT was to establish and improve on colonial statistics. Moreover, the 1931 census listed both the indigenous population and the European populations in the Italian colonies in Africa (Ipsen, 1997, p.284).
The development of the central statistical system was inevitably halted in 1939 when the Second World War broke out.

4 After World War II

After the war, Italy was in poor economic health. On one hand high inflation and poor infrastructure conditions, particularly in transport, made it difficult for activities to take off immediately, and on the other hand the population had to deal with poverty and a lack of housing (Volpi 1989). However, the years immediately after the war were very important for the country: the national constitution was drawn up, passing from a monarchy to a democratic republic with universal suffrage, the foundations were laid for the economic recovery of the following years through the recovery of public finances, taxes were progressively increased and an economic system was put in place based on free trade (including the devaluation of the lira in order to promote export sales), and a political balance was established that was destined to last for decades (Baldi and Cagiano de Azevedo, 2005).

In this context, the interests of the re-established ISTAT focused mainly on the statistical-economic sector. The 1950s and 60s saw a strengthening of administrative statistics, the development of national accounts and the implementation of two large sample surveys: the survey on the labour force4 and on family budgets, followed from 1968 by the survey on family consumption (Bonarini, 1999). These research strategies responded to the pressure of the Parliamentary Inquiry Commissions on poverty and unemployment in Italy which, through surveys performed in 1951-52, underlined the extreme poverty conditions of the Italian population and a great divide between North and South (Braghin, 1978). This survey, performed purely for knowledge purposes without any political consequences, marked to return of the Parliament to a late 19th century tradition of surveys carried out by the legislative powers on the economic and social condition of the country, similar to the Jacini Inquiry on agriculture. In this regard it is worth noting that the debate that developed around the presumed connivance between population scholars and politicians during the twenty years of Fascism and the hypothesis of the submission of scientific autonomy to the ideological purposes of the regime, represented a awkward inheritance for the demographic community in the years following the Second World War. The impotence in offering a clear explanation of the recent past lead to a purely descriptive use of demography,

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4 Other important dates can and must be remembered: 1928 saw the establishment of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP). The organisational structure was composed of national committees and Italy became a member through the CISP, which however decided to leave in 1931 due to some contrasts between Gini and other members of the Union (Ipsen, 1997). 1932 saw the inauguration of the Faculty of Statistics, Demography and Actuarial Sciences at the “La Sapienza” University in Rome. 1939 on the other hand saw the birth of the Italian Society of Statistics, and on September 3rd of that year Mussolini ordered the suspension of all statistical publications, with the exception of demographic statistics.

5 The first sample survey on the labour force was carried out in 1952 in the provinces of Sicily, Milan, Pisa and Naples. The survey became national, and quarterly, from 1957.
reducing the attempts to interpret reality to a minimum and eliminating all forms of ties with political action.

Whatever the reason, guilt or growing interest in the economic boom and the relative growth in private consumption, the priority given to economic issues over demographic ones inevitably led to the development of a statistical organisation which was unsuited to monitoring important social transformations underway. We may think only of the increase in marriage and fertility; the return to foreign emigration immediately after the war; the baby boom; the strong migration from the south towards the industrial triangle and Rome; the urbanisation.

The first real attempt to deal in more detail with the social conditions of the Italians - although motivated by the demands of the national accounts - was made only in 1957 with the "Special survey on some aspects of living conditions", repeated in 1965 and in 1973, gathering information on reading, listening to the radio and watching television, cinema attendance, expectations concerning children's jobs and smoking habits. Again in the same year the "Sample survey on morbidity" and the "Special survey on some aspects of the health and hygiene conditions of the population" gathered information on the incidence of chronic and acute diseases, forms of permanent invalidity and hygiene conditions. For the first time in 1959, ISTAT gathered information on Italian residents' holiday periods (Istat, 2006). The situation did not evolve in the Sixties either; the decade was characterised by undoubted cultural changes, first and foremost the emancipation of customs and the awareness of women's role and rights. Women contributed significantly to both changes in family life and changes in legislation, effectively modifying behaviour, as recorded in the following decade.

5 Large-scale social and legislative transformations of the 1970s

The Seventies opened a season of great reforms in reproduction, family life and employment, in which it clearly emerged how profoundly Italian society had changed. Let us look briefly at the most important moments. 1970 saw the introduction of divorce into Italian legislation, which also survived the abrogative referendum of 1974. In 1971, law no. 30 marked a fundamental step in assuring the social relevance of maternity, guaranteeing greater protection for working mothers through the introduction of the right to (compulsory and optional) maternity leave, the prohibition of dismissal and guaranteed pay conditions. In the same year the Constitutional Court repealed the crime (punishable under criminal law) of propaganda, diffusion and sale of contraceptives. 1975 brought the reform of the family law (law no. 151) which not only raised the marriageable age to 18 years (before it was 16 for men and 14 for

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6 Despite this law, the Minister of Health persevered to maintain the provision prohibiting the sale of contraceptives in pharmacies through the application of some regulations dating back to 1927. To get round the problem, pharmacies sold the pill as a menstrual cycle regulator, spermicides as personal hygiene antiseptics and so on. Only in 1976 were these regulations finally abolished (Baldi and Cagiano de Azevedo 2005).
women) and lowered the coming of age from 21 to 18, but also affected the still extremely oligarchic relations among married couples and parents and children. Again in 1975, law no. 405 introduced public and private well-woman clinics and governed family and maternity care services, moving towards the provision of improved tools for more aware motherhood. 1978 saw the approval of the abortion law, aiming to decriminalise abortion and offering better health care for the women involved, without however recognising abortion as a method of contraception. The law survived an abrogative referendum in 1980. 1975 also saw the so-called "Healthcare reform" (law no. 833) which established the National Health Service as a universalistic public system guaranteeing healthcare for all citizens. This reform also implemented article 32 of the Italian Constitution, which sanctions the right to health of all individuals.

These fundamental steps on one hand had immediate implications not only on family life and family planning choices but also on the whole Italian society, and on the other hand were the result of deep cultural transformations which had been going on for years. The decade saw a drastic drop in birth rates and marriage and the general increase in age in terms of marriage and first children. These years also saw the start of completely new behaviours, including the spread of co-habiting, civil marriages (from 4% to 12% during the decade) and an increase in children born out of wedlock. Although the incidence of the trends that made a break with the past had much less impact than in other countries in central and Northern Europe, Italy too experienced a progressive change in attitudes, opinions and behaviours dictated by socially recognised norms to those in which individual attitudes and opinions are able to substantially modify behaviour, as suggested by the "second demographic transition" theory (van de Kaa, 1988, 2004; Inglehart 1990). Finally, emigration began to decline and the first immigrations of a certain consistency started to be recorded.

Despite the profound changes in behaviour and legislation, official Italian statistics continued to pay little attention to socio-demographic issues and the developments in academic methodology. In the period of the De Meo presidency (1961-1980) ISTAT focused on the development of statistics in the areas of national insurance, social budgets, national accounts and economic studies generally. Despite the fierce international debate on social indicators and the use of sampling methods for observation, the most important socio-demographic statistics remained anchored to traditional population registers and censuses. The few attempts to improve the range of data available on these issues include the repeated sample surveys which had begun in previous years and covering specific sectors such as travel and tourism (after the first edition in 1959, it was repeated in 1965, 1968, 1972, 1975, 1978, 1982 and 1985), reading (after the first edition in 1957 it was repeated in 1965 and 1973), sports (1959, 1982, 1985) and the (attempted) redesign of the exhaustive demographic statistics year books following the logic of événements réduits (cf. Santini 1992): while on one hand this laid the foundations for obtaining indicators between consecutive events (for example it is possible to correctly calculate rates according to the duration since a specific event), on the other hand it led to such a large amount of unmanageable paperwork that the ISTAT partly but rapidly went back on its decision.

In order to understand the intense transformations underway particularly within families, living arrangements, reproduction and birth control, some researchers from the universities of Padua, Florence and Rome attempted to extend the tight boundaries of Official Statistics and in 1979 performed the National sample survey on Fertility
(Inf-1) (the main results of which were published in De Sandre et al, 1982). This was an integrated survey part of a broad, worldwide comparative sample survey project on reproductive behaviour called World Fertility Survey (WFS). ISTAT preferred not to take part in the project given the "sensitive" nature of the questions.

As early as the 1960s the idea had occurred that the measurement of demographic phenomena should be adapted to the real mode of manifestation of the facts of population, modes do not necessarily match the criteria by which administrative bodies will detect which do not necessarily correspond to the criteria with which administrative bodies measure them (Santini, 1992). Although finely classified according to duration, generation of birth and year of occurrence, mere aggregate data was no longer sufficient to provide solutions to research areas that are not purely descriptive. In other words, the need arose for a substantial reorganisation of the now obsolete data production system in view not only of the profound transformations taking place in society but also the methodological developments. One of these was certainly the evolution of the notion of the life course as a complex articulation of individual life paths marked by specific sequences (Elder, 1985). This new perspective, based around the concepts of cohorts and longitudinal analysis developed during the 1950s and 60s\(^7\), sees the time element as fundamental to the definition and substantiation of demographic change. The aggregate in question could no longer be thought of as a set of individuals, but rather a set of biographies, individual events which are formed, overlap and die out over time. The elective observational approach became a sample (and not exhaustive) approach, possibly longitudinal. Over the following years this perspective, which went on to become a paradigm shift in socio-demographic observation and analysis, gradually took form to become an actual research method thanks to the development of specific statistical techniques (event history analysis) able to tackle the events spread along biographical paths in a multi-dimensional level (Mayer and Tuma, 1990), possibly also considering the space and time context.

6 The last 30 years.

Towards the end of the 1970s ISTAT began to improve the quality of both its demographic and economic, social and health information, updating contents and observation methods. The results of these efforts were seen in the early 1980s, when a period of important socio-demographic surveys was launched aiming to fill the backlog of delays. In 1980, after the health care reform and the birth of the national health system (law no. 833/78), the first national survey was launched on health conditions and the use of the health services. 1982 saw the revitalisation of surveys on holidays, travel and sports. Family issues were a source of intense public debate, leading in 1983 to the first survey on "family structures and behaviours", which for the first time also

\(^7\) Worthy of mention among the many important works on the subject are L. Henry (1959; 1963; 1966) and N.B. Ryder (1964; 1965).
tackled the subject of the formation of family units, broadening the interest to solidarity networks (Sabbadini and De Sandre, 2004). The “Multiscopo” (multi-purpose) survey on families (1987-1991) was also performed, representing a turning point for statistical information in the social field, as, at least in the intentions of ISTAT, the move was made from “an information system focusing on the needs of the administration to statistical information focusing greatly on the production of policies aiming to improve social integration and well-being” (Istat, 2006, p. 17).

However, it was only in the 1990s that the information gathering instruments were organised organically, thanks to the consolidation of a system of large-scale sample surveys of families (Istat, 2006 and 2009). Through the large-scale experimentation of new data collection techniques, particularly telephone and computer-assisted surveys, the Multiscopo surveys (from 1993), Family Consumption Survey (1996), and the Labour Force Survey (2000-2003) were redesigned and, between 1994 and 2001, the first panel survey was experimented as part of a European project called EHCP (European Community Household Panel), replaced in 2004 by the European Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), an annual survey aiming to provide a set of transversal and longitudinal indicators pertaining to income, living conditions and social exclusion.

The longitudinal component was also measured in the Multi-purpose Survey on Families and social subjects, retrospectively reconstructing individual biographies concerning professional and family paths. This survey, carried out for the first time in 1998, was repeated in 2003 and 2009 adding new questions in order to partially align it to the international project called “Generations and Gender Programme (GGP)” (Vikat et al, 2007) promoted by the United Nations Fund for Population Activity (UNFPA). The longitudinal approach was further highlighted with the addition of a return survey in February 2007 called “Criticalities in work paths in a gender perspective”. This was a one-off survey which re-interviewed 10,000 people aged between 18 and 64 who had taken part in the "Family and social subjects" survey in November 2003. Although essentially limited to work issues, this return represented an important innovation, allowing researchers to check a posteriori the intentions and expectations expressed in 2003 against the behaviour effectively experimented in the following years.

Again in the field of large-scale sample surveys performed by ISTAT, it is also worth mentioning the survey on births carried out in 2002 and 2005. This survey, designed specifically to fill a gap in the historical data concerning birth rates, due to the suspension of birth rate statistics from registry office sources following the Bassanini-bis law of 1998, provided important and useful information on this issue of work/family reconciliation for women with children.

The institutional innovations and progress in the field of statistical information were not however limited to the activities of ISTAT. In 1976, after the first World Population Conference (Bucharest, 1974), the National Population Committee was established under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, using the joint consultancy of demographers, ISTAT, representatives of various Ministries and the political world. Generally speaking, its impact on society was limited: in order to gain the greatest possible scientific consent, the indication of the most serious socio-economic and health problems linked to demographic dynamics was halted (prudently) in the face of the possible political action implications. Even when orientations which could be used politically were expressed, such as the proposal for parsimonious
planning of the number of teachers in line with the fall in school populations, politicians did not give them appropriate consideration. However, it is significant that the Committee led to the rebuilding of bridges between the demographic world and the institutions which had been broken since the end of the Second World War (De Sandre 2005). The activities of the Committee waned progressively during the 1990s.

1981 saw the establishment of the IRP (Population Research Institute) of the CNR (National Research Council), which in 1983 performed the first survey on the opinions of Italians concerning couplehood and children, with the aim of investigating the motivations underlying the consolidated trend of the decline in birth rates (Palomba, 1987). The IRP continued to work intensely also during the following years. Although not continuously, it published various editions of its Population Reports, in some cases attempting to combine the analysis of the main demographic trends with orientational policy proposals.

In the academic world, two surveys were carried out which aimed to reconstruct the "life stories" of a broad sample of Italians in order to be able to examine the interdependencies between various life paths (education, work, family and children) analysing not only the events but also the duration in specific states (such as still living with parents or the condition of being an atypical worker). The first chronologically is called the "Second national fertility survey (Inf-2) carried out in 1995 following the WFS survey. This survey, designed within the "Fertility and Family Survey" project, supported by the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UN-ECE), aimed at an in-depth investigation of conjugal and reproductive behaviour in order to offer a more effective international comparison of results than that achieved in the Eighties (De Sandre et al, 1997). In contrast to the abstention of the late 90s, ISTAT directly supported this survey.

Two years later saw the start of the ILFI (Longitudinal Survey on Italian Families) which included an interesting attempt to extend the measurement of longitudinal data also with a prospective, and not merely retrospective, view. Following the layout of the panel survey, this covered five separate measurements taken in 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003 and 2005 (for a presentation of the survey and the main results of the first wave, see Schizzerotto 2002).

The aim to improve international comparability lies behind two other broad sample surveys designed to investigate the attitudes, values, beliefs and behavioural models of European populations: the European Social Survey (ESS) and the European Values Survey (EVS). The ESS, which began in 2002, is carried out every two years in more than 30 countries and is currently on its fifth wave (the sixth is under preparation). The survey represents a veritable reference point for many researchers and policy makers (Cavalli et al 2010). Unfortunately the Italian participation, supported by the contribution of the CNR, was suspended after the second wave. This is not however the case for the EVS, for which Italy has taken part in all four waves issued thus far (the first was in 1981, the last in 2008).
7 Discussion

The production of statistical information is never a neutral process. As stated by Alonso and Starr (1987), official statistics do not merely represent a mirror of reality but hypotheses and theories on the nature of society and its social, economic and political interests. Throughout the 150 years of Italian history, the role of statistical information has been focused on the needs of the administration, functional to government action. This aspect, which was particularly evident during the twenty years of Fascism, was however valid in other periods of Italian history, including the period of post-unification which saw the construction of a united country, and the post-war period which saw the construction of the republic. Changes in society are often accepted with a delay by official statistics, also because the institutions themselves have difficulty in understanding and selecting the important changes in the dynamics in progress. The inadequacy of the statistical system in understanding the phenomenon or at least attempting to investigate it using a broad spectrum of instruments was particularly evident in the 1960s and 70s in the light of the growing international debate on the great transformations of society, the regulatory system and the methods of analysis.

To assess the extent of the delay with which Italy began to investigate demographic dynamics using broad-spectrum tools, we need only to look at the fact that the first sample survey carried out in the USA on birth control behaviour dates back to 1938; the first in this country was carried out in 1979. In the Italian census the concept of "cohabitant" was introduced in 1991 and only in 2001 information concerning children not recognised by both members of the married or cohabiting couple, i.e. children from previous relationships, were requested clearly and in detail (Corsini et al 2008). The case of immigration is equally striking. In the late 1980s, when the phenomenon had already reached a certain size (the number of foreign nationals registered in the censuses from 81 and 91 doubled, from 321,000 to 625,000), attention was still focused mainly on emigration: in 1988 the Second National Conference on Emigration was held (the first was in 1975); in 1989 the CGIE was established, the representational body of Italian communities abroad, chaired by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, aiming to protect the living conditions of Italians abroad and strengthen ties with the motherland. Returning to the censuses, the questions concerning geographical mobility were introduced only in 1971 when the migratory phenomenon was already in strong decline.

From our analysis of the 150 years of history of Italian statistics, two aspects substantially emerge: the (partly inevitable) lags between the change in behaviours and the ability to capture them promptly and appropriately and the difficulty in recovering observational statistics which began in the late post-war period and was achieved only in the past twenty years with the development of a survey system covering a wide variety of subjects (from births to families, the use of time, consumption, health conditions, etc.) and with a wealth of demographic, social and economic information. Currently the National Institute of Statistics is a forerunner in many aspects, aiming to compensate for the remaining information gaps. Over the past few years, the challenges faced by ISTAT concern in particular the improved distribution and exploitation of existing data through a more efficient system of free microdata distribution; a more
efficient communication strategy based first and foremost on a renewed website and the adoption of new statistical information dissemination strategies through new web instruments; the development of surveys in as-yet unexplored fields, such as the conditions and social integration of foreigners and the attempt to exploit the available resources better through the development of linkage systems between different sources. Clearly, despite these interesting developments, some criticalities remain and there is still plenty of room for further improvement. On one hand old problems persist, including that concerning data distribution times: as the then-director Viviana Egidi underlined, despite the efforts made by the National Institute of Statistics, the promptness of data distribution remains weak (De Sandre and Ongaro 2000). On the other hand, new fields of research demand increasingly sophisticated, detailed and accurate data. Think only, for example, of the request for panel data in order to link behaviour to the evolution of expectations (see in this regard the documents produced by the last three Commissions for the Guarantee of Statistical Information reported in Trivellato et al 1995, Schizzerotto et al 2001, Corsini et al 2008) or the growing request for qualitative data also in demographic fields; the lack of geo-referenced data; the production of data for the assessment of public intervention or that with political implications (such as short-range mobility, extreme poverty, the use and satisfaction of services; social expenditure and private healthcare).

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