

Book Review

*The New New Zealand:
Facing Demographic Disruption*
Paul Spoonley, Massey University Press (2020)

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Distinguished Professor Paul Spoonley FRSNZ is New Zealand’s most prolific book-publishing sociologist. The 287-page volume under review is his 28th book, many of them co-authored or co-edited with other sociologists. In the public arena, he is the most visible and well-known sociologist, and has become the go-to academic when the media want comments on population issues. He is a regular contributor to Kathryn Ryan’s radio programme, *Nine to Noon*, and is often approached by Duncan Garner, presenter of Newshub’s *The AM Show*, to clarify or explain population-related issues.

The media frequently refer to Spoonley as a demographer. In an article titled “New Zealand birthrate sinks to its lowest ever” (*The Guardian*, 19 February 2021), Eleanor de Jong states, “Demographer Professor Paul Spoonley from Massey University said New Zealand society is undergoing unprecedented disruption, exacerbated by the global pandemic.”¹ There is a link in de Jong’s article to Massey University’s website that features *The new New Zealand*. In this promotion, Spoonley is referred to as a “leading demographer” who

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“hopes his new book will foster wider discussion about the need for a population policy”.²

In his acknowledgements in *The new New Zealand*, Spoonley states “I’m not really a demographer but rather a sociologist who dabbles in demography” (p. 274). This clarification is very important for me as a reviewer, and I hope he will make this point when interacting with the media. *The new New Zealand* is not a demography of the transitions in fertility, mortality and migration that underpin the “unprecedented disruption” in New Zealand society that his book addresses. Rather, it is a thought-provoking set of reflections by one of the country’s leading social scientists on many of the topics that demographers write about. To some readers, this distinction might read as unnecessary disciplinary nit-picking, but a demographer would have written a different text on the same topics and the reviewer would have been assessing the argument from a different perspective.

Professor Spoonley notes in the Preface that his first encounter with demography was as an undergraduate and graduate student at the University of Otago where one of his favourite lecturers was the late Brian Heenan, an eminent population geographer (see obituary in *NZPR*, Vol. 46). The political economy of migration appealed to Spoonley and his master’s and PhD theses both featured this approach, which was very popular in the social sciences at the time. Migration and its impact on the labour force, as well as the impact of racism on social relations and social cohesion, have been two of his most prominent enduring research interests. The four chapters (5–8) in *The new New Zealand* addressing aspects of international and internal population movement and the development of cities and regions are the ones that reflect his long-standing original research into international migration, playing to his early training in geography and drawing on the work of geographers and economists. The chapters on the family (3), fertility (4), the older population (9) and intergenerational tensions and conflict (10), on the other hand, are somewhat newer areas of

research for Spoonley, and it is contributions to the literature by fellow sociologists as well as demographers that are acknowledged occasionally in these chapters.

Professor Spoonley has written a book that has the potential to attract a wide general readership. It is deliberately non-technical, lacks disciplinary jargon, draws extensively on serious journalism as sources, and keeps a common feature of demographic texts – tables and diagrams – to a minimum. He states in the Preface: “In this book I have tried to limit statistical content, with varying success, and I have not engaged in some of the necessarily complex technical discussions about the generation or analysis of statistical issues” (p. 9). This is another important caveat for a reviewer to keep in mind – few demographers could have written a 12-chapter book that spans so many dimensions of demography and societal change using only three tables and 24 diagrams.

Endnotes are used to indicate sources; there is no consolidated references list or bibliography. The media rather than the academic literature features most prominently in the reference citations for each chapter. This is another clear signal that the book has been specifically designed to inform a general readership – Spoonley has deliberately gone to some lengths to acknowledge the contribution the media has been making to engaging with the trends and issues that are the focus of his analysis. His primary concern is to raise awareness of issues and to assist the public, policymakers and politicians to understand the evidence and be open to what demographers and other population specialists are pointing out. As he notes at the end of his Preface: “The new New Zealand is here, and we need to talk about it” (p. 9).

The book commences with a chapter titled “A reshaped society”. Spoonley introduces here the global transition in the three demographic processes – fertility, mortality and migration – that has transformed populations everywhere, and outlines how New Zealand’s population composition has been radically reshaped by these processes. I was surprised to see no acknowledgement in this

chapter of the substantive research New Zealand's most eminent demographer, Emeritus Professor Ian Pool CNZM FRSNZ, has done on both demographic processes and the age-structural transitions these have generated at both global and national scales. The primary academic reference to understanding age-structural transitions given in the endnotes is a presentation by Professor Natalie Jackson to the Southland Region and Invercargill City Council in 2015. Jackson, a demographer, is a frequent commentator on the impact of population change at the regional and community levels but it is unlikely that her presentation will be accessible to a wider readership. The concept of age-structural transitions is fundamental to understanding the issues that Spoonley addresses in this book. Pool's two co-authored books (*Population, resources and development: Riding the age-waves* (Springer, 2005), and *Age-structural transitions: Challenges for development* (CICRED, 2006)) are definitive references in this regard, and both can be accessed in university libraries.

After outlining the main components of the demographic transition in a series of short sections addressing population stagnation or decline, fertility, ageing, death, ongoing urbanisation and geographic concentrations, mobility and migration, Spoonley concludes Chapter 1 with some comments on an argument put forward by economists in the 1930s about how a decline in population growth would constrain economic growth, or what has been termed "secular stagnation". Population growth rates are slowing at all scales – global, national and regional – and population stagnation or decline rather than growth will become a reality at some stage during the 21st century in many parts of the world. This is at the heart of the "unprecedented change" that has encouraged Spoonley to refer to a "new demography" and to write this book.

The concept of secular stagnation is a contested one that continues to be debated by economists, but Spoonley notes that it "is especially relevant to New Zealand given the population stagnation of regions (Chapter 7) and the constraints – economic and social – that then apply" (p. 26). He feels that insufficient attention is being

given to the possibility that population stagnation will significantly restrict communities and regions as numbers and proportions engaged in the labour force fall, the tax base declines, and viable communities become financially less sustainable at reasonable levels of social and economic well-being. This is not a new concern in New Zealand and a collection of essays edited by Spoonley titled *Rebooting the regions: Why low or zero growth needn't mean the end of prosperity* (Massey University Press, 2016) addresses many of the key issues. Rather than viewing population stagnation as “a demographic timebomb”, Spoonley prefers to explore some of the options that are available. This is what *The new New Zealand* seeks out to do.

Chapter 2, “Understanding demography”, is not really a chapter about demography as such. As Spoonley states in the opening sentence: “This chapter is as much about how we know about ourselves – essentially via the census – as it is about the key elements in our past demography” (p. 30). The first section focuses on the New Zealand census as a source of information about the population and some issues surrounding history, acquisition and use of census data. This is followed by a section on “Counting ethnicity” which includes a short comment on the history of the Māori population. Reference is made to the way Māori have been defined and counted in the official statistics and to the contributions Ian Pool and Tahu Kukutai, New Zealand’s first Māori Professor of Demography, have made to the question of how to record Māori identity. This is an interesting section but again I was surprised at the lack of any specific reference to Pool’s *Te Iwi Maori. A New Zealand population past, present and projected* (Auckland University Press (1977, 1991) which remains the only substantive demography of the Māori population.

The latter part of Chapter 2 highlights some of the major themes of the book in four sections: 1) natural growth and declining fertility; 2) immigration, emigration and ethnic diversity; 3) an ageing population; and 4) regional and spatial differences. Each section is around a page long and inevitably a lot of questions arise

when reading this compressed summary for a reader with a reasonable familiarity with New Zealand's demography. Many of these questions are addressed in later chapters but there are occasions when misleading statements are made that suggest that there is some confusion at times between absolute and relative population change, and between specific migration flows and net migration.

For example, on page 45 it is stated: "Throughout the twentieth century the South Island experienced a steady population decline." This is obviously not the case. In the 1901 Census of the Colony of New Zealand, the population of the South Island was 382,140,³ but in 2001, the South Island's usually resident population was 906,759,⁴ and by the 2018 Census of Population and Dwellings, it had grown to 1,104,531.⁵ The South Island's population has not grown as fast as the North Island's population has, and some regions (territorial local authorities) have experienced decline at times, but the South Island definitely did not experience overall population decline throughout the twentieth century. It is also stated later on page 45 that there is "an out-migration from Auckland in the twenty-first century". There has always been an out-migration from Auckland as well as an in-migrant flow. Out-migration from this urban area is not a recent phenomenon. What is new is *net* out-migration from Auckland in its population exchanges with other parts of the country. Some slippage in references to in- and out-migration per se on the one hand and *net* in- or -out migration on the other occur at times in the discussions of internal and international migration, which can cause confusion for the reader familiar with demographic concepts.

Chapter 2 concludes with some observations about future population growth. Considerable emphasis is placed on two well-established demographic trends: declining fertility, and large spikes in net migration gains from flows of people into and out of the country. The latest manifestations of these long-run trends are a recent drop to sub-replacement fertility (featured in *The Guardian*

article mentioned earlier) and a very large spike in net migration gains between 2013 and the closing of New Zealand's international borders in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Neither the shift to sub-replacement fertility nor a large spike in net migration gains should be considered major aberrations in the context of New Zealand's demography over the past 50 years.

Aotearoa New Zealand's population reached 5 million in March 2020 – 30 years earlier than was projected in 2004 when 2050 was the year when the country was projected to pass this milestone. This has led Spoonley to be concerned that “New Zealand's long population boom has caught the government unawares” (p. 46). In this context, it is perhaps worth recalling that in the early 1970s, the ‘high’ variant of Stats NZ's projections had the country's population at 5 million by 2001; that is, 20 years before it eventually reached this level. The magnitude of net migration gains between 2013 and 2020 did catch a number of government agencies, as well as migration researchers like me, by surprise, just as the very large net migration losses in the late 1970s and early 1980s did.

The drivers of the “unprecedented” demographic change Spoonley emphasises – declining fertility, increasing longevity and substantial fluctuations in net migration – have been with us for some time now. They are not new, and they have attracted considerable attention from researchers as well as policymakers and, at times, politicians. During the final months of Sir Jim Bolger's National Government in the late 1990s, the interests of these three groups in demographic change coalesced and provided the platform for New Zealand's first national population conference.⁶ While the media panned the conference for being a “talkfest” that delivered few positive outcomes, it did result in significant developments in the development of population databases and a number of innovations in immigration policy.

Finally with regard to comments in Chapter 2 about forecasts of population change over the medium term (20–30 years) at regional and national levels, there is considerable certainty about population

outcomes barring sudden changes in patterns of fertility, mortality and migration. This is because the great majority of people who will be in the population in 20 to 30 years are already present and can be located in what demographers term the population pyramid. Spoonley doesn't discuss the dynamics of population pyramids in Chapter 2, although he does refer to them later in the book. But if Chapter 2 is about understanding demography, then this is where the dynamics of population pyramids need to be introduced. These are at the heart of the age-structure transformations that Pool and Jackson have researched at length for New Zealand's regions, major ethnic groups and the national population. They are also at the heart of population projections and assessments of future fertility and mortality levels and rates. In many ways, Chapter 2 demonstrates that Spoonley is, as he said in the Preface, "not really a demographer but rather a sociologist who dabbles in demography" (p. 9).

Chapters 3 to 10 are titled Modern families (3), Where have all the babies gone? (4), "Here we come" (5), The New Zealand diaspora (6), The rise – or fall – of regions (7), Supercity (8), When I'm 64 (9) and "OK boomer" (10). They are all interesting to read and all make useful contributions to our understanding of the way demographic processes are impacting on New Zealand's contemporary society and economy. In this regard, I was encouraged by a friend's unsolicited comment early in the new year when we were talking about books we had been reading, and he said that he had just finished Spoonley's book on New Zealand's population. He is a distinguished scholar in the humanities and said he found the book helped him to understand better the relationships between population dynamics and societal change. Chapter 10, "OK boomer", was particularly helpful in assisting him to appreciate the causes and contexts of contemporary intergenerational tensions. It is the sociology lens that Spoonley brings to his analysis of population change that provides the new insights in this book, not what Spoonley says about demographic processes.

Spoonley raises questions in all the chapters, challenging the reader to reflect on the implications of recent demographic trends for the future population. My extensive notes taken while reading these chapters indicate that there are a lot of points that Spoonley has made that I would debate and that is precisely what he wants readers to do. There are also a number of statements about demographic processes that are misleading and some that are incorrect. But this is not the place for a point-by-point assessment of Spoonley's analysis and interpretation. I am impressed he wrote this book quickly with a view to stimulating as well as informing a debate about population issues of relevance for the medium-term future. I would suggest that if the book goes into a second edition, which it could well do depending on public demand, that Spoonley gets a couple of demographers to review the text before it is republished. There are a lot of places where minor amendments to the text will remove misunderstandings and errors (including referring to me on p. 90 as a demographer – like his early mentor, Heenan, I am a population geographer, not a demographer).

The final two chapters are very short, at just six and eleven pages, respectively. Chapter 11 asks the question “What next?” and Chapter 12 contains some concluding comments on a “new New Zealand”. Spoonley raises a lot of interesting questions in Chapter 11 relating to population policy, regional New Zealand, ageing, Māori and Pasifika, workforce planning and demographic policy innovation. He does not have specific answers to these questions, but it is clear from his concluding remarks in Chapter 12 that he is convinced that “our political systems and players are simply not up to the task of developing a new vision based on innovative policy” (p. 241) to address the unprecedented demographic changes that are challenging the normative views about key social and cultural institutions in New Zealand.

Among the questions he raises in Chapter 11 are several that were prompted by other population specialists, especially Len Cook (former Government Statistician) and Robert Didham (a specialist in

demographic analysis at Stats NZ). I was surprised to see so little reference to the Māori, Pacific and Asian students and scholars with whom Spoonley has been interacting and assisting to get published in several of his co-edited collections of essays on population-related themes. Their voices and questions do not surface either in the substantive chapters of the book or the final two thought-provoking chapters addressing “What next?”.

As New Zealand’s leading sociologist addressing diversity issues, and one of the architects of a settlement policy to assist new migrants to come to grips with their new country and society, it was surprising to see no reference in the concluding chapters to questions frequently raised by members of these communities. Some of them overlap with the action points Spoonley documents in Chapter 11, especially with reference to ageing and workforce planning, but the book is completely silent on a major demographic issue for all migrant families – the policy-driven requirement for most of them to maintain a dual base for their families in New Zealand and in their source countries.

Temporary migration of parents and grandparents to visit families in New Zealand, or a reverse flow overseas of children visiting their parents and grandparents in their source countries, is an issue that has profound implications for the well-being of migrant families in New Zealand and for social cohesion in the wider society. This is an area of immigration policy that Spoonley’s colleague Dr Liangni Liu has been addressing with support from the Marsden Fund in recent years, and it is one that his long-standing Chinese research colleagues at the University of Auckland, Emeritus Professor Manying Ip and Associate Professor Elsie Ho, have been addressing for many years. It is an issue that has bedevilled family dynamics within the Pasifika community for several decades – something his friend and research collaborator Professor Cluny Macpherson has a deep personal experience of. None of the innovative research on Chinese migrants that Liu, Ip and Ho have been doing

and that Macpherson and his Samoan wife have done on Pacific migrants is mentioned in this book.

In concluding, I want to make a constructive suggestion. Spoonley raises the issue of population policy in Chapter 11, something he says there has not been a conversation about since the 1970s. There *have* been serious conversations about population policy in more recent years and the 1997 National Population Conference was one of the occasions for such a conversation. But Spoonley is correct when he suggests that it is time for another national conversation that spans a wide range of communities and national interests. Perhaps Koi Tū, the Centre for Informed Futures at the University of Auckland,⁷ where Spoonley is an affiliate researcher and adviser, could take the lead in co-constructing with expert and key stakeholders, including politicians and policymakers, a brief for a second National Population Conference in 2022, 25 years after the first one in 1997. This would be one way of ensuring New Zealand's demography received "personal and collective attention as we encounter and grapple with the radically different demography of the twenty-first century" (p. 237).

Notes

- 1 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/18/new-zealand-birthrate-sinks-to-its-lowest-ever?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other
- 2 https://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/about-massey/news/article.cfm?mnarticle_uuid=D7F46551-FFA9-4D42-BE0B-F0BB843EF016
- 3 https://www3.stats.govt.nz/historic_publications/1901-census/1901-results-census/1901-results-census.html#d50e1088
- 4 http://nzdotstat.stats.govt.nz/wbos/index.aspx?_ga=2.132941454.1866841039.1613786228-80311088.1613681036#
- 5 http://nzdotstat.stats.govt.nz/wbos/index.aspx?_ga=2.132941454.1866841039.1613786228-80311088.1613681036#
- 6 <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/feature/population-conference>
- 7 <https://informedfutures.org>