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Roland Pressat, an eminent demographer in Alfred Sauvy's team

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Roland Pressat, an eminent demographer in Alfred Sauvy's team

Jean-Paul Sardon and Chantal Blayo

Abstract

Roland Pressat (1923-2020) is an eminent representative of the researchers shaped by the "Sauvy spirit": a rigorous approach, quality drafting and a taste for popularisation. His contribution to the dissemination of demographic analysis was considerable and many demographers, across the entire world, owe their training to him, both through his teaching, in Paris and Montreal, and through his publications. His pedagogical innovation was the invention of "tasks" as an apprenticeship for research. A man with passionate interests, he was also a collector of etchings, wines and cigars.

Keywords

Pressat; Sauvy; Henry; Ined; IDUP; University of Montreal; teaching; demographic analysis; practice of demography.

Résumé

Roland Pressat (1923-2020) est un éminent représentant des chercheurs forgés dans « l'esprit Sauvy ». Sens de la rigueur, qualités de plume et goût pour la vulgarisation. Sa contribution à la diffusion de l'analyse démographique fut considérable et de nombreux démographes, à travers tous les continents, lui doivent leur formation, tant par son enseignement, à Paris et à Montréal, que par ses ouvrages. Son innovation pédagogique fut la création de « devoirs » comme apprentissage à la recherche. Homme de passion, il était également collectionneur de gravures, amateur de vins et de cigares.

Mots-clés

Pressat ; Sauvy ; Henry ; INED ; IDUP ; Université de Montréal ; enseignement ; analyse démographique ; pratique de la démographie.

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in Alfred Sauvy's team**
Jean-Paul Sardon and Chantal Blayo

Table of contents

CHILDHOOD AND TRAINING	5
ROLAND PRESSAT AT INED: A CONVERTED TRY FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE "SAUVY SPIRIT"	5
A PRECISE, SIMPLE AND CONCISE PENMANSHIP	7
ROLAND PRESSAT AND THE RIGHT USE OF MATHEMATICS.....	8
QUALITIES IN SUPPORT OF TEACHING AND THE DRAFTING OF MANUALS.....	10
A REMARKABLE PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATION	12
NO CONCESSION TO A LACK OF RIGOUR	13
TRAVELS IN AMERICA.....	14
A MAN WITH PASSIONATE INTERESTS.....	14

From the very beginning of the *Institut national d'études démographiques* (Ined, the French Institute for population studies) in 1945, Alfred Sauvy¹ aimed at throwing the light of a wide variety of scientific disciplines on population issues. To this end, he surrounded himself with personalities from diverse backgrounds, a lot of them already active in the Carrel foundation², as well as officers released from duty at the end of the war.

This eclectic recruitment and the size of the work to accomplish could only be achieved in a specific environment, based on freedom and autonomy, now commonly referred to as the “Sauvy spirit”.

In the 50th anniversary issue of the journal *Population*, Roland Pressat³ described this mindset, born of the encounter of the founding team with the personality of Alfred Sauvy, as a way of guiding researchers and offering them the most favourable environment. Thus, as he noted at the very beginning of his article, entering Ined in 1953 meant joining a team, unrivalled at the time, which brought demography to the highest level.

Typically, this meant encouraging the widest opening on to all aspects of population issues, and giving to colleagues total freedom in the conduct of their research.

This is what Roland Pressat put in practice throughout his career.

¹ Alfred Sauvy (1898-1990), founder and first Director of Ined (1945-1962).

² *Fondation française pour l'étude des problèmes humains*, a foundation for the study of human issues created by the Vichy government at the instigation of Dr Alexis Carrel.

³ Pressat, Roland, « L'Ined à ses débuts : L'esprit Sauvy », *Population*, 1995, 50-6, pp. 1349-1354.

Childhood and training

Roland Pressat was born on June 28th 1923 in Montmartre, in north-west Paris, to a majordomo father and a seamstress mother. As the family moved to Donzy (Nièvre), he was schooled in Cosne-sur-Loire, before integrating the local teacher training college following the wish of his parents. When the Vichy government decided to close all such colleges, in October 1941, he was sent to an upper secondary school, with a scholarship. As Roland Pressat himself used to say, this was his good luck, as he felt he would be good at sciences.

This is how, after his *baccalauréat* exams, at the end of secondary school, he took a bachelor's degree in mathematics.

During his studies in Paris, he was taken under the wing of Régis Blachère⁴, an eminent islamologist, whose family came from the Nièvre, in Burgundy. All his life he expressed a great admiration for this man of high moral rectitude, whom he described as his benefactor. Pressat's memories of him were revived when he himself started having eyesight problems and feared that he might become blind, like his mentor.

During his training period, marked by extreme deprivation, Roland Pressat obtained a temporary job in 1945, as a demonstrator in the *Palais de la découverte* Science Museum; he always referred to this experience with great enthusiasm.

Roland Pressat at Ined: A converted try for participation in the “Sauvy spirit”

After the war, Roland Pressat started teaching mathematics as an assistant in Paris; however, he decided to reorient his career towards demographic research after reading a little poster about Ined on a wall of

⁴ Régis Blachère (1900-1973), a professor of Arabic at the French School of oriental languages (Ecole nationale des langues orientales, aka Langues O) from 1935 to 1950.

the *Grand Palais* Art Museum. To this end, as Alain Girard⁵ related in his book on the History of Ined⁶, in 1953, he took it upon himself to write to the Director and asked if he would receive him.

Roland Pressat himself explained that he had added to his letter a page indicating his diplomas on the left and his jobs on the right, a synthetic presentation appreciated by Alfred Sauvy, who agreed to see him. As retold by Alain Girard⁷, Sauvy did not conceal that he would only take him on trial for a year, and asked him to enrol, in parallel, at the *Institut de statistique de l'université de Paris* (Statistical Institute of the Paris University (ISUP))⁸. During his curriculum, his first professor of demography was Paul Vincent⁹; he acquired the first elements for calculating basic indicators, which had already been expounded by Michel Huber¹⁰, his predecessor in this specific field¹¹.

It is true that, at the time, demography was hardly taught. Alfred Sauvy, with his way with words, used to define demography as a discipline without masters and without students¹². Most of those who were part of the team of researchers at the beginning of Ined and would eventually be recognised as masters in demographic research were hired with diplomas in their initial discipline, with no particular training in their new field of study.

But, as the administrative aspects of research developed, constraining rules were established in all directions, including for the recruitment of researchers, spelling the end of the golden age of the “Sauvy spirit”. The pioneers of that time were not spared, and were regularly advised to write a thesis to strengthen their position. Roland Pressat maliciously related the falsely candid reply which Louis Henry once gave to one of these “advisers”: - And shall I be in the jury?

⁵ Alain Girard (1914-1996), a researcher at Ined and professor of demography at the Sorbonne as from 1964.

⁶ Girard, Alain, *L'INED, Histoire et développement*, Paris, Editions de l'Ined, 1986, p. 114.

⁷ Girard, Alain, *L'INED, Histoire et développement*, op. citat. p. 114.

⁸ Where he graduated in 1954.

⁹ Paul Vincent (1912-1979), Director of research at Ined, was *i.a.* head of the Section on quantitative studies and current demographic analysis at the end of 1945.

¹⁰ Michel Huber (1876-1947) taught at ISUP and was vice-President of the International Statistical Institute.

¹¹ Michel Huber, *Cours de démographie et de statistique sanitaire*, in 6 booklets, Paris, Hermann & Cie, 1938-1941.

¹² Quoted by Roland Pressat, « L'INED à ses débuts : L'esprit Sauvy », *Population*, 1995, 50-6, p. 1350.

As underlined by Gérard Calot: Faith, such as animated Roland Pressat and is said to move mountains, advantageously replaced any conceivable diploma! And one is suddenly seized with bitterness realising that applicants to Ined, such as were Paul Vincent, Jean Bourgeois-Pichat¹³, Louis Henry¹⁴ or Roland Pressat, would today, be refused, as a matter of principle, for reasons which can probably be explained but oh! so unjustified and regrettable!¹⁵.

A precise, simple and concise penmanship

Arriving at the time when Jean Bourgeois-Pichat was leaving for the United Nations in New York, Roland Pressat assisted Louis Henry in the preparation and drafting of a regular report on the French demographic situation, a task that he would fulfil during more than ten years, later to be followed by the production of an annual Report to Parliament¹⁶.

When drafting these articles, he distinguished himself, in keeping with Alfred Sauvy's requirements, by the precision, simplicity and concision of his drafting, qualities underlined by Gérard Calot¹⁷, in the foreword to the issue of *Population* dedicated to Pressat: anonymous author of the *Rapport annuel au Parlement sur la situation démographique de la France*, Roland Pressat showed how eager he was to present the results of researches in a form that made it accessible to the largest number of people¹⁸.

¹³ Jean Bourgeois-Pichat (1912-1990), *i.a.* Director of Ined from 1962 to 1972.

¹⁴ Louis Henry (1911-1991), whom Alfred Sauvy considered as the father of historical demography.

¹⁵ Calot, Gérard, « Préface », *Population*, n°6, Nov-Dec 1991. Numéro spécial : Hommage à Roland Pressat : méthodes et applications de l'analyse démographique, p.1363

¹⁶ Decree n° 73-222 of February 22nd 1973 -- defining the status of Ined, which replaced the 1945 ordinance creating it -- required the Institute to produce an annual report to Parliament on the demographic situation of France.

¹⁷ Then Director of Ined.

¹⁸ Calot, Gérard, « Préface », *Population*, n° 6, Nov-Dec 1991, *Op. citat.*, p. 1 364.

Roland Pressat and the right use of mathematics

These drafting qualities are evident in the definitions of his *Dictionary of Demography*¹⁹, as in all his other works. One of the characteristics of his scientific publications, which he shared with Louis Henry, was that he never resorted to complicated mathematical tools. He liked to say that demographic research needed no more than the mastering of the four basic operations.

This effort not to give in to the easy and pretentious recourse to mathematical formulae and continuous notation was made for reasons of legibility and clarity, aiming at a wider readership than that of specialists.

Yet he had this mathematical skill, as he later proved by producing, after his retirement, a very accessible manual of mathematical demography, which he gave for publication to the AIDELF, the international association of French-speaking demographers²⁰.

In Roland Pressat's view, mathematics was first of all a tool which could also be clearly expressed in plain language. This is why he was fascinated by the literary quality of mathematical manuals drafted by great mathematicians of the XIXth and beginning of XXth centuries, which he liked to acquire.

This is probably why he became friends with Marc Barbut²¹, whom he invited to lecture at Ined in the mid-1960s. He had regular exchanges with him about statistical problems, verifying the accuracy of his critical arguments about some publications. This work led to the production, in 2001, of two articles in his journal *Mathématiques et sciences humaines*²².

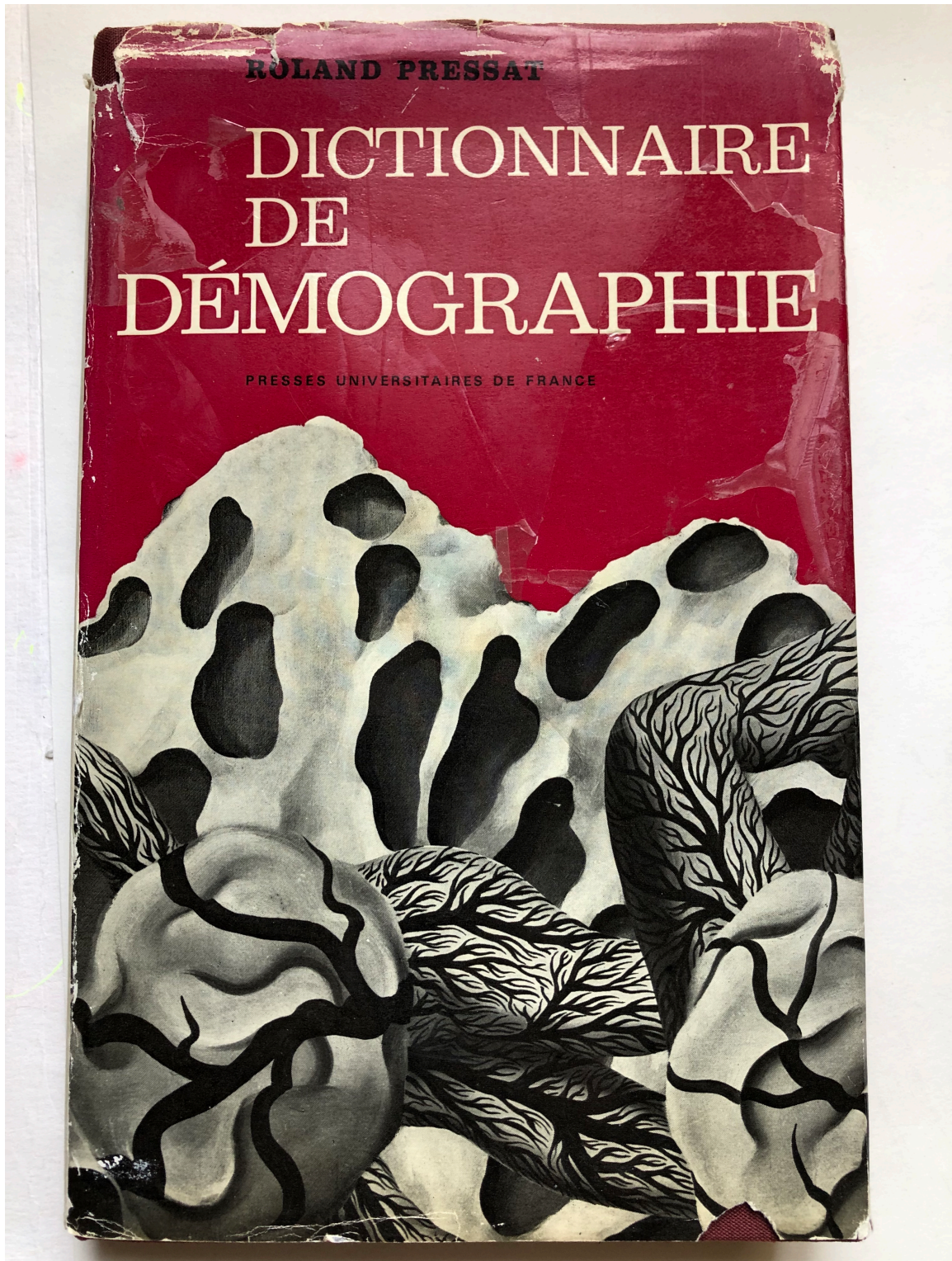
¹⁹ Pressat, Roland, *Dictionnaire de Démographie*, Paris, PUF, 1979, 297 p., tabl., annexe. Published in English by Blackwell Publishers, 1985, 256p.

²⁰ Pressat, Roland, *Éléments de démographie mathématique*, Association internationale des démographes de langue française (AIDELF), 1995, 280 p.

²¹ Marc Barbut (1928-2011), a mathematician, statistician and epidemiologist for the EHESS, a French academic establishment for the study of social sciences.

²² Pressat, Roland, « Christian Huygens et la table de mortalité de Graunt », *Mathématiques et sciences humaines*, 153, 2001, pp. 29-36 ; Pressat, Roland, « Quelques vues de Leibnitz en relation avec la durée de la vie humaine », *Mathématiques et sciences humaines*, 155-156, 2001, pp. 43-51.

Cover page of the *Dictionnaire de démographie* by Roland Pressat (1979)



He also maintained a prolonged and regular relationship with Nathan Keyfitz²³, another great figure of demography, who also died in his 97th year, in 2010.

Roland Pressat was definitely part of Alfred Sauvy's team, by the quality of his penmanship and by the diversity of his centres of interest, the extreme wealth²⁴ of which is immediately evident in his bibliography²⁵, but also by his taste for popularisation.

He thus contributed to many publications, including the journal *Population et Avenir*, but most of all to a journal for medical practitioners, *Le Concours médical*, for which he wrote nearly 110 articles over the course of 38 years.

Qualities in support of teaching and the drafting of manuals

In the second half of the 1940s various universities offered some courses devoted to population issues, with the approach specific to the main discipline in which these courses were integrated. The academics concerned, who became close to Ined (for them a good source of lecturers), decided in 1948 to create an informal group, the *Réunion des directeurs d'instituts universitaires et centres interfacultés de démographie*, then presided by the sociologist Jean Stœtzl²⁶.

After a strong involvement of this group, and of the geographer Pierre George in particular²⁷, and following the creation of the *Institut d'études démographiques de l'Université de Bordeaux* (IEDUB) directed by Jean

²³ Nathan Keyfitz (1913-2010), a Canadian academic whose career, continued in the US, brought him to Harvard.

²⁴ He was one of the first Western demographers to take interest in the USSR and establish contacts with Russian demographers.

²⁵ https://www.ined.fr/fichier/s_rubrique/29903/biblio.r.pressat.fr.pdf

²⁶ Jean Stœtzl (1910-1987), *i.a.* a professor of social psychology at the Sorbonne University (1955-1978), introduced the method of opinion surveys in France.

²⁷ He drafted, on behalf of the group, a proposal for the creation of a postgraduate training in demography. Cf. Girard, Alain, *L'INED, Histoire et développement*, Paris, Editions de l'INED, 1986, pp. 208-209.

Stœtzel, the *Institut de démographie de l'Université de Paris* (IDUP) was established in 1957 and directed by Alfred Sauvy, also Director of Ined. Both institutes were entitled to deliver post-graduate diplomas, the *Diplôme de Démographie générale* and the *Diplôme d'Expert démographe*. In Paris, Louis Henry, who was invited to teach demographic analysis, asked Roland Pressat to take care of the practical classes. Alfred Sauvy also asked him to draft a manual of demography for students^{28 29}.

The manual was to be an immediate success, in France and in the world, as testified by the large number of translations, not always published with the agreement of the author or the editor.

There is no doubt that its author's pedagogical skills and the quality of his writing were the driving forces behind its success.

From 1965 on, Roland Pressat shared the course of demographic analysis with Louis Henry. This was to be the basis for a publication³⁰.

In 1969, Roland Pressat completely revised³¹ his first manual, essentially an inventory of the main indicators, to which he added his courses on "Principles" inspired by the work of Louis Henry published in *Population*.

Roland Pressat's contribution to the dissemination of the discipline that is demography was considerable, thanks to his sense of pedagogy. Not only did he teach for many years at the IDUP, and also in Montreal, but he was also the author of many publications.

Thus a large number of demographers, throughout the world, owe him their training, either directly via his lecturing or thanks to his books.

²⁸ Pressat, Roland, *L'analyse démographique. Méthodes, résultats, applications*, Paris, PUF, 1961, 403 p.

²⁹ Also published in English: *Demographic Analysis, Methods, Results, Applications*, London, Edward Arnold, 1972 / Chicago-New York, Aldane-Atherton, 1972. (Translator's note)

³⁰ Pressat, Roland, *Principes d'analyse. Cours d'analyse démographique de l'IDUP*, Paris, INED, 1966, 155 p.

³¹ Pressat, Roland, *L'analyse démographique, concepts, méthodes, résultats*, Paris, PUF, 1969, 323 p.

A remarkable pedagogical innovation

In this field, he had a real pedagogical talent, which he explained with modesty, saying that, not being a genius, he at times found it difficult to understand this or that reasoning; as a result, he was better prepared to explain the points on which he knew students might stumble.

However his major contribution to the teaching of demography was the invention of “tasks”. These tasks were not just exercises applying demographic indicators, they were mini-researches guided by replies to questions and along which concrete issues found their solutions. His masterpiece in this context was without doubt his *Pratique de la démographie*, a collection of these tasks, published in 1967³², and which would make his reputation³³. This innovation, a truly revolutionary approach to teaching demographic analysis - no longer with a catalogue of recipes, but as an apprenticeship of research where one progresses step by step through a process of reflection – still does not have the exposure it deserves.

Roland Pressat’s disciples, like Yves Péron³⁴ or Chantal Blayo, and a few of their students, followed his lead, creating new tasks. The most important demographic analysts, some of them still active, were all trained in this fashion, but the constraints of new diplomas make this type of training more and more difficult ; such innovative and formative methods require that the teaching of demographic analysis not be buried in wide-ranging human sciences curricula..

In view of Roland Pressat’s teaching talents and the wide recognition of his books, he was often asked by organisers of conferences and international congresses to chair sessions on the teaching of demography³⁵.

³² Also published in English: *A workbook in Demography*, London, Methuen, 1974. (Translator’s note)

³³ Girard, Alain, *L’INED, Histoire et développement*, Paris, Editions de l’Ined, 1986, p. 210.

³⁴ Honorary Professor at the University of Montreal.

³⁵ Cf. Girard, Alain, *L’INED, Histoire et développement*, Paris, Editions de l’Ined, 1986, pp. 214 ; Pressat, Roland, *Avancement de l’enseignement et de la recherche démographique en Europe*. Council of Europe, 2nd European Population Conference, (6th subject: *Developments in Demographic Teaching and Research in Europe*), Strasbourg, 31 Aug-7 Sept. 1971, 207 p.

From 1973 on, he shared his teaching activities between Paris and Montreal, where he was first a visiting lecturer, and then, from 1974 to 1978, a full professor in the Department of Demography of the University of Montreal.

During his stay in Canada, Roland Pressat taught a number of Quebec demographers, contributing to the expansion of what is usually known as the “French school of demography”, which was already well established there, as many scholars had been through IDUP and/or Ined.

Roland Pressat also made good use of his time in Quebec by drafting his *Dictionary of Demography*. He concluded his Foreword underlining the importance of his Canadian years for the production of his book; he was pleased to recognise all he owed to the work environment he had been offered at the Department of Demography of the University of Montreal³⁶, ending with the mention: Montreal, 14th September 1978.

This dictionary reflects the quest for simplicity, accuracy and rigour which characterised his writings.

No concession to a lack of rigour

This sense of rigour, to which he accepted no concession, made him react vigorously when he read demographic publications with erroneous analyses or not using demographic terms in the appropriate way or employing current words instead of the scientific ones.

Roland Pressat maintained this critical sense and rigorous approach all his life. In 2018, aged 95, he concentrated all his energy on the completion of his last work: *Observations sur le Dictionnaire de démographie et des sciences de la Population*³⁷, the critic of a dictionary³⁸ which did not display the necessary rigour.

³⁶ Pressat, Roland, *Dictionnaire de démographie*, Paris, PUF, 1979, 297 p.

³⁷ Self-published in 2018 and also appearing in *Les analyses de Population & Avenir*, Jan 2019, 70 p., ISSN 2552- 2078 (<https://www.population-et-avenir.com/les-analyses-de-population-avenir/>)

³⁸ Meslé, France, Toulemon, Laurent, Véron, Jacques (dir.), *Dictionnaire de démographie et des sciences de la Population*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2011, 528 p.

Conscious that this work could have only a limited distribution in its paper version, Roland Pressat accepted with pleasure Gérard-François Dumont's proposal to publish it digitally. Thus his last work was an e-publication in the journal *Les analyses de Population & Avenir*³⁹.

Travels in America

It may have been his years in Canada which gave Roland Pressat the taste for great outdoors and extended travels. For instance, on several occasions, with his wife Cécile, he explored the United States in rented cars, including the mythical Route 66, from Chicago to Los Angeles.

Roland Pressat loved driving in the US, praising the calm and kindness of the American drivers, in contrast with the irritability of their French and Parisian counterparts.

He also went twice to Cuba, with his wife and grand-children; during one of these trips, looking for drinks for his family, in a little village, he found a bar where Fidel Castro was eating with some friends. His grand-children, not bothering with manners, took a photo of the "Lider Maximo".

A man with passionate interests

Beyond his demographic and academic life, Roland Pressat was above all a man with passions (in a sharing way, as was his wont). First of all, a passion for demography, in particular demographic analysis, in which his rigour found all its fulfilment.

Strict accuracy is probably what seduced him in another of his passions, etchings, more precisely the cubist work of Jacques Villon⁴⁰, a passion he shared with his wife Cécile. Since he could only do things with intensity, he became one of its great collectors and specialists. In 1989, he wrote the brochure for an exhibition devoted to the artist⁴¹.

³⁹ <https://www.population-et-avenir.com/les-analyses-de-population-avenir/>

⁴⁰ Jacques Villon (1875-1963).

⁴¹ Roland Pressat, *Jacques Villon. L'œuvre gravé. Exposition autour d'une collection*, Paris, 1989.

His passion brought him, until quite recently, to extend his collection widely, from ancient masters to contemporary engravers. He had also an interest for tapestries, in particular those by Lurçat.

His sense of sharing led him to regularly exhibit his recent acquisitions or his preferred work-pieces, and was an inexhaustible source of stories on each item, on the composition of the etching, its technique, the circumstances of its creation or the various collections it had been a part of.

Among his preferred exhibition spaces, the *Institut néerlandais* (Dutch Cultural Center) now the *Fondation Custodia*, in the 7th arrondissement of Paris, came on top. He greatly admired its founder Frits Lugt, art lover and informed collector. This admiration brought him to embark, purely for his own satisfaction, on the translation from English of the 473 pages of his biography, published in 2012.

Similarly, he liked to share his tastes in the field of literature, in particular his admiration for Paul Léautaud⁴², and his *Journal littéraire*, praising his gusto, spontaneity, plain speaking and caustic bent.

Roland Pressat was also a great amateur of Bordeaux wines, which he also liked to explain and share with his friends. For many years, he was one of the close friends invited to his table by Jean-Pierre Moueix, owner of the Petrus domain and art lover, who allowed him to admire one of the versions of Degas's Small dancer.

If his natural leaning led him to wines of the Bordeaux region, he also expounded with enthusiasm the qualities of old Armagnacs, Madeiras or Rhums.

The latest of his passions was cigars, and his wish to share this pleasure with other fans led him to join the Bordeaux Havane Club, which met every month at the Bistrot du Sommelier, created by Hervé Valverde⁴³. He would smoke a cigar after Sunday family meals, or often with guests, always wishing to make new converts, as, for him, a cigar should not be smoked alone, it is a pleasure to be shared.

⁴² Paul Léautaud (1872-1956).

⁴³ Whom he is said to have met on a flight to Cuba.

Whatever he undertook, Roland Pressat did it with intensity, always trying to know everything so as to better embrace the subject, meeting various people linked to his centres of interest, collectors, engravers, wine producers, visiting cigar factories or tapestry manufactures... He always endeavoured to share his encounters and transmit his passions, talking about the latest exhibitions he had seen, evoking the Dutch Cultural Centre, which he particularly liked, or etchings he had seen in a gallery or auction house.

With his manuals, decades later, Roland Pressat remains and will continue to remain, with Louis Henry, a key reference for the training of generations of demographers. But beyond his scientific activities, because of the wide variety of his interests, and the intensity of his investment in those interests, Roland Pressat truly appears as a perfect disciple of Alfred Sauvy.

Translation: Sylvie Vanston⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ Also a student of Alfred Sauvy and Roland Pressat in Paris (Translator's note)

La publication

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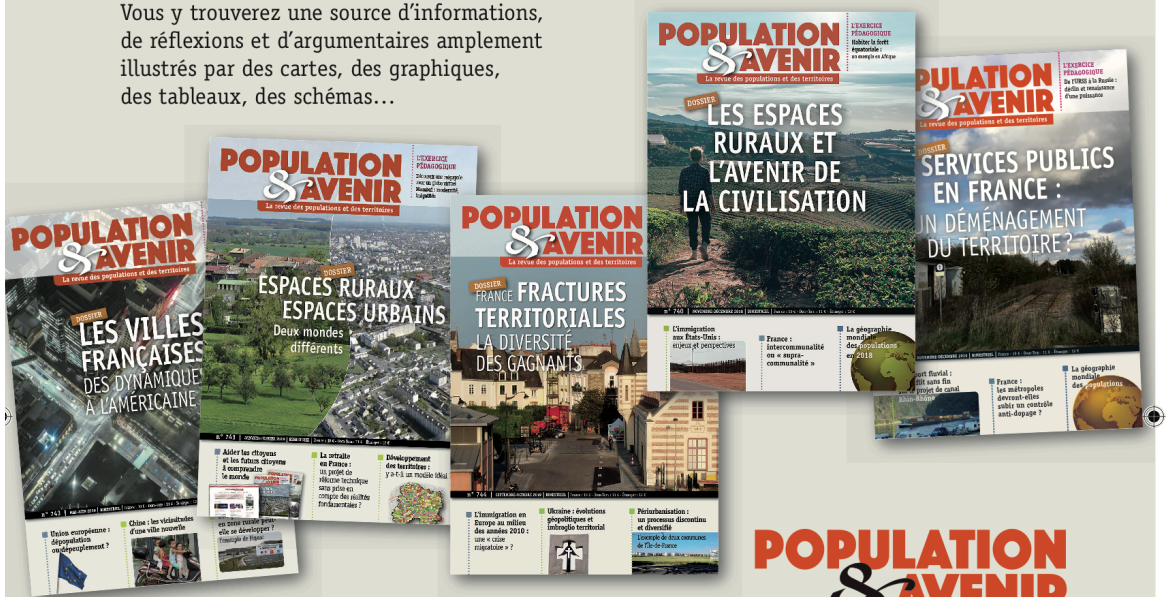
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