Vital demographic events are at once global and deeply personal. On a personal level, demographic events include if, when, and whom we marry and sometimes divorce; if, when, and how many children we have; and why and when we die. On a global scale, much attention has recently been paid to the demographic divide, or the gulf in birth and death rates among the world's inhabitants. On the one side are poor countries with relatively high fertility rates and low life expectancies. On the other side are wealthy countries with fertility rates so low that population decline and rapid aging are expected. A primary reason for concern over the global demographic divide is not simply the differential pace of population growth but the disparities in human health, economic well-being, and future prosperity implied by these demographic trends. Reducing demographic and health disparities are social-justice issues of concern to social scientists, public-health professionals, policymakers, and the general public.

As a social-justice issue, the demographic divide is believed to contain within itself the seeds of its own problem and apropos solution. Poverty and inequality are frequently depicted as consequences of population growth. Economist and founder of modern demography Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834) argued that because of the “natural” imbalance between too many people and too few resources to support them, poverty, misery, and a Hobbesian-like war of all against all are always lurking on the human horizon. The only way to avoid this ill-fated predicament is to delay marriage and reproduction while keeping in check sexual activity prior to marriage. Malthus saw high fertility, which persists in some parts of the global South today, as a negative force that generates pauperism, disease, and death and threatens sustainable economic growth. Malthusianism/neo-Malthusianism continues to shape how we perceive poor peoples and their increase. Modern concerns over population growth can still, in large part, be attributed to racist and classist fears that the Third
World will engulf the North and threaten its power, accelerate outmigration from the South to the North, pollute the environment, and spread disease and criminality.  

But the purported dangers of uncontrolled fertility do not end there. High fertility is also believed to be incompatible with the social-justice cause of women’s equality and liberation. It is a veritable axiom of social-scientific thought that the historical contraction in family size—both a cause and consequence of the introduction of modern methods of birth control—helped separate sex from reproduction and thus free women “from a chronic round of pregnancy and childbirth.” This disentangling of sex from the “exigencies of reproduction” spawned the sexual revolution and is believed to have democratized intimate relations between the genders. While there is no doubt that these changes in reproduction have been revolutionary, we must also probe the underlying misconceptions about women’s reproduction in the global South to which they have given rise. Chief among them is the unquestioned assumption that large families are symptomatic of the patriarchal subordination of women.

Bedouin constitute prime examples of Arab-Muslim peoples living on the other side of the population divide with pronounced fertility and population growth rates. Given that the small nuclear family is one of the main hallmarks of modernity and women’s liberation, the high fertility of Bedouin women—among the highest fertility levels known to humanity, at over nine children per woman—marks them and others like them situated on the other side of the global demographic divide as a foil to modernity and gender equality. The reproductive-rights and population-control movements have contributed to the pathologization of high fertility, promoting a false dichotomy that equates small families with reproductive freedom, economic well-being, and health advantage and equates large families with reproductive oppression, economic hardship, and health disadvantage. With respect to Arab-Muslim societies, women’s subordination and lack of autonomy are believed to be manifested demographically in early and prolific reproduction, polygyny, and close-kin marriages.

The specter of “overpopulation”—attributed to “prolific” reproduction among poor women of color—continues to loom over the social-justice commitment of improving the health and welfare of socially disadvantaged groups. Class and racial polarities of the past have been reproduced in the present. Since its inception, the science of demography has demonstrated interest in social inequality, albeit an often sinister interest in containing poor sectors of bourgeois society in Europe and subjugating racially “infe-
rior” peoples in colonized societies around the world. The aim of the present book is to tell a different story about the demographic lives of women and men living on the poor side of the rich/poor divide.

There is an emerging awareness in the anthropological literature that reproduction cannot be studied in isolation from the political and socio-economic institutions that define it and are defined by it. As an anthropological demographic study, the present book follows in the wake of previous studies from Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America that have examined the role of social class or occupational inequality in shaping microreproductive behavior, and the role of broader political-economic forces in determining the onset and pace of fertility transition. A critical limitation of previous microdemographic research on social-class variation is that much of the historical demographic literature, especially that prior to fertility transition, is confined to western Europe, where there is abundant high-quality parish register data going back centuries. Another limitation is that the demographic experiences of marginal peoples farther removed from consolidated state control, particularly nomadic groups, are seldom incorporated into general insights about social inequality and health. Disciplinary divisions between sociocultural and biological subfields have contributed to the fragmentation of anthropological demographic knowledge, with sociocultural researchers mostly focused on the demography of agrarian village and urban ethnic communities in nation-states, and biological researchers mostly concerned with the demography of “primitives,” “preindustrial,” or nomadic peoples.

Theoretical divisions are no less apparent. Biodemographers tend to draw on evolutionary theory and human biology (reproductive biology, physiology, and genetics) to understand human demographic behavior, whereas (cultural) anthropological demographers direct attention to the historically and culturally contingent structures of power. The theoretical inclination of anthropological demographers to treat demographic events as products of social action and biodemographers to treat them as products of biological evolution results in a theoretical impasse, leaving the reader without much help in determining the relative merits of each approach. With respect to questions on inequality, such divisions make it difficult to draw broader conclusions about if/how historical processes of class struggle have shaped the demographic experiences of nomadic peoples in peripheral areas of state control. While several ethnographic studies of foraging and pastoral societies suggest an egalitarian sociopolitical order, the issue of how social structure and demography relate to each other remains an open question.
Some scholars have even gone so far as to suggest that egalitarianism, at least in pastoral societies, is a myth.⁹

The present study addresses these questions by analyzing demographic findings from peasant Europe and Asia alongside those from nomadic and seminomadic communities living within and between state boundaries, particularly my own work with Bedouin agropastoralists in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon.¹⁰ In examining the causes of demographic differentiation, public-health researchers have further pointed out that as socioeconomic conditions improve and the incidence of primarily environmental disease concomitantly declines, biogenetic disorders are going to account for an increasing proportion of worldwide morbidity and mortality.¹¹ The general assumption is that in societies or social sectors where socioeconomic inequalities are low or have been substantially reduced, biological factors will emerge as the primary determinants of health disparities. A major challenge for demographers and health-oriented researchers is to explore the convergences of biology and politics without naturalizing nurture and socializing nature.

At the core of the book is a comparative ethnographic and demographic study of Bedouin in the Bekaa Valley—one that provides a new basis for understanding the demographic underpinnings of social inequality by considering demographic conjunctures from across the range of egalitarian and class-stratified polities. An anthropological demographic study on the nomadic peripheries provides a productive terrain on which to think about social inequality and the meaning of reproductive justice. The book contributes to a growing area of research on the global politics of reproduction and marks one of the first anthropological demographic studies of Bedouin in the Middle East. Fundamental questions addressed in this study, which pave the way toward broader understanding of socioeconomic disparities in reproduction and survivorship, include: Have the Bedouin and other nomadic groups experienced hierarchical class formation and class distinctions in demographic behavior similar to those found in rural/semirural peasant communities of Europe and Asia? How do local structures of class, kinship, and gender articulate with Bedouin fertility and health? How pervasive is the demographic gap between better-off and worse-off groups within localities and nations? How have some societies managed to escape the three-pronged Malthusian trap of poverty, high fertility, and high mortality? In what ways should conventional views of reproductive justice and liberty be modified to include Bedouin women and other women of color on the interstices of state societies?