

## BOOK REVIEWS

### POPULATION IN HISTORY

Essays in Historical Demography

D. V. GLASS AND D. E. C. EVERSLEY, EDITORS

Chicago, Aldine Publishing Co., 1965, ix + 692 pp., \$17.50.

### AN INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH HISTORICAL DEMOGRAPHY

E. A. WRIGLEY, EDITOR

New York, Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1966, xii + 283 pp., \$7.50.

Population has been one of the most publicized biological factors implicated in historical causation. Yet, only rather recently, since the 1950's, have historians begun increasingly to concern themselves with historical demography. In 1948, J. C. Russell could say that "while the historian finds 'population' next to 'popularity' in the card index, he regards it as popular with all of the wrong people," that is, with mathematically minded persons such as "census officials, life insurance and other statisticians, biologists, birth control and anti-birth control protagonists and ultra-nationalists."<sup>1</sup> In the light of this attitude it is not surprising that population took no particular form in the historical mind.

Historians attempted to explain various historical phenomena, for example, the decline of Rome, as due essentially to demographic change, but few historical studies of population had actually been undertaken on a systematic, technically satisfactory basis prior to 1949.<sup>2</sup> Since then, however, stimulated from various sides by an increasing interest in population problems, research in historical demography has been more actively pursued. Yet American his-

torians still show relatively little interest in this area of research. This may be a reflection of the circumstance that little attention has been given to demographic problems in American historical research, in sharp contrast to the situation in Great Britain and Europe.<sup>3</sup> This state of affairs is unfortunate because the last two decades have seen a definite enlargement of the knowledge of European demography, particularly for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These developments are well presented in the two volumes under review here.

For the most part the improved knowledge is due not to the discovery of new collections of historical data, although this has occurred, but rather to technical advance in the examination and analysis of already available source materials, specifically to the development of the method known as family reconstitution. Due chiefly to the work of Louis Henry of the Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques at Paris, this method is described in detail and its rules defined in a manual first published in 1956, and republished in 1965 in a greatly expanded second edition.<sup>4</sup> (The two volumes reviewed here contain material on this subject. It is particularly well presented in a chapter by E. A. Wrigley in the volume edited by him.) For this procedure to be productive a record of vital events, such as a parish register, must be available with few or no breaks and with adequate detail, over a long period of time. From this record, if the individuals listed can be identified with confidence, one can establish existence of specific families and their members and collect a body of personal and family data about them. In short, one can build up a sample of families which can be subjected to analysis so as to yield birth and death rates and the like.

Family reconstitution was first employed by Henry in an exemplary study of the parish of Crulai in Normandy. His study demonstrated what a wealth of information could be obtained from the simple entries in a good parish register by diligent and imaginative analysis.<sup>5</sup> Since then a number of investigators have carried out similar studies in other parts of France. Some of these are reported and discussed in the volume edited by Glass and Eversley.

Under the influence of the French investigations a group of British historians and demographers undertook to apply the method of family reconstitution to English parish registers. These efforts have been centered in the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. The initial work of this group is presented in the volume edited by Wrigley. The detailed description by the editor of the procedure involved in carrying out family reconstitution has already been referred to above, but special mention must be made as well of the chapter by Peter Laslett on the study of social structure from the listings of the inhabitants of communities. An initial study by these investigators, covering a period of 300 years, from 1538 to 1837, was made on the parish of Colyton in southeast Devon, and proved as successful and interesting as the French studies.

The investigations carried out so far and the results presently available, as presented in the volumes reviewed here, clearly indicate that further application of the method of family reconstitution can provide detailed, quite accurate information about aspects of group life of basic importance in understanding the nature and dimensions of community health problems in past periods. For example, one may ascertain at what ages people usually married, how many in the community remained unmarried, when children were born to married couples, how many were born out of wedlock and how many children died at what ages, as well as the ages at which adults died and from what causes. Moreover, more precise information on the occupational structure of a community may be obtained, along with insight into the social and geographic mobility of its members.

Given more precise knowledge about the structure of a community's population and the changes which it may undergo over a period of time, problems emerge, of which some are of considerable interest to historians (medical and other), sociologists and demographers. Records of births, marriages and deaths indicate how sensitive these vital phenomena are to plenty and scarcity, to the occurrence of disease (endemic or epidemic), to war and social disorder, to changing social attitudes and to other factors

and processes that produce severe disturbances of the social order. Generally, in earlier periods, acute crises of subsistence were followed by a reduction in the number of births. Thus, during a crisis period in 1661–62, the number of conceptions in Crulai fell to one-third of those in the preceding year. Similar findings have been established for other communities. (See the chapter by J. Meuvret in the volume edited by Glass and Eversley, particularly pp. 520–521.) Does this drop in birth mean that pregnancies were prevented, or that they were interrupted by the illness or death of the pregnant women? The finding that births tended to rise sharply again within periods as short as 12 months indicates that deaths among women of childbearing age or already pregnant played no significant part. Does that mean that psychological factors were involved and that contraception may have been practiced as a temporary expedient in crisis situations?

Heretofore the accepted belief was that the limitation of family size did not appear as a widespread practice in Europe before the end of the eighteenth century. Recent evidence indicates, however, that at least in certain groups, for example, the bourgeoisie of Geneva and the inhabitants of rural Colyton on Devon, the practice was already present in the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> These findings raise questions which have as yet only incomplete or no answers. What motivated people to limit their families, and how far was this done consciously to achieve defined goals? Whatever methods were used—*coitus interruptus*, abortion, or other—their conscious application seems to have been characteristic of the Genevan bourgeoisie and of villagers in the west and north of England. But how far can the behavior of the inhabitants of French communities in times of food scarcity be interpreted in these terms? Was the drop in births evidence of an emotional reaction of despair, the psychological price of living in an untenable situation, or was it rather a tactic for dealing with a crisis, the dimensions of which were unpredictable? The suggestion has been made that an answer to this question might be obtained in part by trying to determine whether the effects of plague epidemics or of other diseases were analogous to those consequent on food short-

ages. Some evidence suggests the occurrence of a decline in births at such times, but the problem remains open for investigation. Moreover, this problem touches on only one aspect of an intricate complex of questions concerned with the impact of disease on communities and their populations and thus with the larger area of the social history of disease.

The ramifications of the problems raised cannot be pursued further here. Enough has been said, however, to indicate the value of these volumes lies not only in terms of their contents, but perhaps even more so in the possible further development and application of the ideas and methods which they offer. For example, one might suggest the application to American communities of the method of family reconstitution. The records of American communities, especially for earlier periods, undoubtedly have their defects, but with imagination, perseverance and the help of specialists in related disciplines much can probably be done with the available material.

Still other contributions in these volumes, such as Hajnal's paper on European marriage patterns, merit attention. The limits of a review, however, do not permit individual contributions to be considered. One can recommend these volumes to all those concerned with the history of populations, whether from an economic, medical, sociological or psychological viewpoint. They deserve to be studied, not just read.

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#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Russell, J. C., Demographic Pattern in History, *Population Studies*, 1, 388-404, 1947-48.

<sup>2</sup> Rosen, George, Review of Russell, J. C., BRITISH MEDIEVAL POPULATION, in *Journal of the History of Medicine*, 4, 347-348, 1949.

<sup>3</sup> For examples of American work see Greene, E. V. and Harrington, V. D., AMERICAN POPULATION BEFORE THE FEDERAL CENSUS OF 1790, New York,

1932; Sutherland, S. H., *POPULATION DISTRIBUTION IN COLONIAL AMERICA*, New York, 1936; Yasuba, Y., *BIRTH RATES OF THE WHITE POPULATION IN THE UNITED STATES, 1800-1860*, Baltimore, 1962; Coale, Ansley J. and Zelnik, M., *NEW ESTIMATES OF FERTILITY AND POPULATION IN THE UNITED STATES, 1855-1960*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Fleury, Michel and Henry, Louis, *DES REGISTRES PAROISSIAUX A L'HISTOIRE DE LA POPULATION. MANUEL DE DEPOUILLEMENT ET D'EXPLOITATION DE L'ETAT CIVIL ANCIEN*, Paris, Institut National d'Études Démographiques, 1956; ———, *NOUVEAU MANUEL DE DEPOUILLEMENT ET D'EXPLOITATION DE L'ETAT CIVIL ANCIEN*, Paris, Institut National d'Études Démographiques, 1965.

<sup>5</sup> Gautier, Etienne and Henry, Louis, *LA POPULATION DE CRULAI, PAROISSE NORMANDE. ETUDE HISTORIQUE*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1958.

<sup>6</sup> Henry, Louis, *ANCIENNES FAMILLES GENEVOISES. ETUDE DEMOGRAPHIQUE XVI<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> SIECLE*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1956; see also the volume edited by Wrigley.