Seventieth Anniversary of Population

A retrospective of the first issues of *Population* published In 1946

Foreword

Population celebrates its seventieth anniversary this year. To mark the occasion, we have chosen to republish four articles from 1946, one in each of our 2016 issues. Each one is accompanied by an introductory commentary that highlights the topicality, or obsolescence, of the research topic covered and, from a twenty-first century perspective, looks at how the issues discussed have evolved over time (see Foreword in 1-2016).

Following on from the article by Alfred Sauvy entitled "Assessment of French immigration needs" (1-1946), with an introduction by François Héran and published in *Population* 1-2016, the second issue featured an article by Paul Vincent on "Population ageing, pensions and immigration" (2-1946), commented by Didier Blanchet.

This latest issue of the journal will present an article by a historical demographer, Jean Meuvret, on "Subsistence crises and the demography of France under the Ancien Régime" (4-1946), analysed by Christine Théré and Isabelle Séguy. The series will be rounded off by an article by Jean Bourgeois on "Marriage, a seasonal custom. Contribution to a sociological study of nuptiality in France" (4-1946) commented by Arnaud Regnier-Loilier and Wilfried Rault.

Olivia Samuel, Anne Solaz and Laurent Toulemon
Population editors

All Population *articles since 1946 are available in electronic format via the* Population *website (www.journal-population.com) which links to the Cairn and Persée portals (for the oldest issues), and to Jstor (http://www.jstor.org/).*

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Demography and Famine: A Pioneering Article

Jean Meuvret's (1901-1971) article on subsistence crises is a classic of post-war historiography.(1) It was perfectly timed to lay the foundations for the study of population history, a field of economic and social history still unexplored at that time, whose importance had just been highlighted by Louis Chevalier (1946) in one of the first issues of *Population*. This "founding paper" has marked several generations of historical demographers, whether or not they had the good fortune to attend the classes taught by the author at the École pratique des hautes études from 1951.(2) Meuvret had exceptional knowledge of the archive collections that could be used by quantitative historians to explore research avenues whose contours were already clearly defined. He intended to follow these avenues himself and, above all, encouraged others to do so. He was among the first to reveal the neglected potential of the parish registers, an accessible and informative source for reconstituting population change in the pre-statistical era and for identifying demographic characteristics of the past. Meuvret thus set the stage for historical demography, be it the major survey on "the population of France from Louis XIV to the Restoration" launched by Louis Henry with the help of Michel Fleury in 1958, the pioneering work of Pierre Goubert (1960, 1966) or the masterful study of famine under the reign of the Sun King by Marcel Lachiver (1991).

Meuvret had been working for several years on a thesis on subsistence problems during the long reign of Louis XIV, and had published two articles in 1944, respectively in the *Mélanges d'histoire sociale* (*les Annales,* founded by Bloch and Lucien Febvre, had been renamed in 1942), and in the *Journal de la Société statistique de Paris*.(3) The first discussed the quality of goods price lists

(1) This article was republished in *Études d'histoire économique* (1971), a collection of texts published shortly before the author's death.

(2) Jean Meuvret held the chair in rural history at the "Economics and social sciences" 6th section founded in 1947 and headed by Lucien Febvre until 1956, then by Fernand Braudel, and which later became the EHESS. A graduate of the *École normale supérieure* and with an advanced teaching qualification in history (*agrégation*), he taught and served as deputy librarian at the *École normale supérieure* for some twenty years before beginning a late teaching career in higher education. For his biography, see Cobb (1972), Soboul (1972), Goubert (1972, 1996, pp. 151-156).

(3) Meuvret began his thesis under the supervision of Henri Hauser (1866-1946). He had completed two major sections in 1952, but never defended it. The manuscript was published by his "students" after his death (Meuvret, 1977-1988). On his contribution to economic history, see Grantham, 1989).

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(known as *mercuriales*) – the main data source for tracking the history of grain prices – using weekly records, if available, in preference to annual evaluations, and examined the pitfalls to be avoided in metrological and monetary conversions. The second made important methodological recommendations for reconstituting price changes, such as the use of a moving median rather than a moving average to eliminate the influence of outliers in very irregular data series. It also argued that the crop year was a more appropriate timeframe for capturing food price fluctuations, especially to study their impact on the populations exposed to price rises.

Two years later, in the *Population* article presented here, Meuvret brings greater depth and breadth to his analysis of the demographic "repercussions" of exceptional price rises. He examines their complex mechanisms and looks at ways of quantifying them. In his view, the exact share of deaths attributable to famine itself is impossible to determine "in statistical terms". He also highlights the disruptive effect of famine migration which is liable to distort such measures. His scant use of figures to support his hypothesis may seem surprising. As pointed out by Albert Soboul (1972), the author "was not fatally attracted to numbers", contrary to what some would have us believe. Another highly original feature of this article is the focus on a hitherto relatively unnoticed past phenomenon to be taken into account when assessing crisis intensity, namely the downturn in births, measured by the calendar of conceptions. It is as much a consequence and a characteristic symptom of crisis as excess mortality – if not more so. Last, the contrast revealed between the two major types of crisis – acute crisis and latent crisis – remains one of the major findings of this study, admittedly based on a limited volume of data and whose representativeness, at the level of the kingdom, was open to question. The graph is still as strikingly illustrative today, though the author says little about how it was constructed.

Twenty years later, Meuvret (1965a, 1965b) acknowledged that the source used for the price curve was "wholly inadequate". But by that time he could refer to the work of his "disciples" – Pierre Goubert in particular – to reaffirm the often positive correlation between high grain prices and demographic crises, even if other observations, such as those of René Baehrel (1961) in Provence, contradicted or qualified this assertion; like all pioneering articles, it raised controversy and was sometimes caricatured by its adversaries. In particular, the distinction between crop year and calendar year was seen as a pointless refinement, and very time-consuming for historians (Baehrel, 1954). Pierre Chaunu, in his classic provocative style, appeared to sound the death knell of Meuvret's teachings in 1962: "There are subsistence crises that do not kill, and demographic crises in periods of plenty; even when the two coincide, it is not a simple relation of cause and effect… It is not hunger that kills, but the repercussions of hunger… The subsistence crisis is no longer the fashionable cliché of Ancien Régime demography" (Chaunu 1962). Meuvret nonetheless

remained a respected pioneer of the "French school of demography" (Dupâquier, 1995; Kaplan, 2015; Séguy, 2016).

The question of the link between scarcity and natural population change raised in the eighteenth century (Meuvret made use of anonymous studies published by Louis Messance in 1766), pursued in the nineteenth century (Loua, 1867) and abundantly researched in the 1980s, has since been abandoned by historical demographers and economic historians. The subsistence crisis model is known and recognized, although the correlation between grain price increase and mortality increase is not as systematic as Jean Meuvret believed. Subsistence crises are now studied from a broader perspective. The main causes of famine are well-known, and climate historians have described both the random fluctuations and the long-term patterns which, throughout the Little Ice Age, durably disrupted farming cycles and techniques. In parallel, economic historians have pointed up the inadequacies of the kingdom's production and distribution system, due in some cases to rigid and sometimes ineffective rules, and in others to demographic factors (such as a farm labour shortages after successive years of excess mortality). However, deeper structural causes must also be mentioned. The practically permanent state of war under Louis XIV not only ruined the populations, but also made it difficult to transport corn from one province to another. Moreover, much of the grain produced was set aside to supply food and animal feed to the troops. Last, the support systems run by municipalities and charities, some of them with a long tradition of providing food to the poor, limited the local impact of high food prices upon the poorest populations. But this support, provided mainly in towns and cities, inevitably attracted beggars and ruined farmers who were promptly turned away; these institutions did not have the means to support both the urban and rural poor. As well as studying their causes, historians also examined the consequences of shortages and famine. While Jean Meuvret focused on the immediate demographic impacts of severe food scarcity, other historians considered the more long-term effects, notably lost births. Today, researchers are exploring the physiological, psychological and epidemiological consequences of malnutrition and famine, notably by studying the severe food crises of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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SUBSISTENCE CRISES AND THE DEMOGRAPHY OF FRANCE UNDER THE ANCIEN RÉGIME

The major subsistence crises, such as those of 1693 or 1709, were characterized by an exceptional increase in grain prices, coinciding with a no less exceptional upsurge in deaths and a decline in conceptions. But these phenomena cannot be clearly detected unless the counts are made by crop year, and not by calendar year. While crises of this type disappeared in the first half of the eighteenth century, price increases continued to influence demographic behaviours in a manner which, though less visible, was none the less considerable.

"Through our various investigations, we have obtained proof that the years when the price of corn was highest were also those in which mortality was most severe and illness most common". It was in 1766, in a memoir entitled *Réflexions sur la valeur du blé tant en France qu'en Angleterre depuis 1674 jusqu'en 1764* [Reflections on the value of corn in France and England from 1674 to 1764], later published in Messance's *Recherches sur la population* [Research on population] that a key problem was first raised: that of the effect of subsistence crises on the demography of France under the Ancien Régime. A highly complex problem, indeed, which can be broken down into numerous questions, of which some have no answer, at least in the form in which they are habitually posed, while others may be resolved over the shorter or longer term by means of research yet to be undertaken, but whose principle must first be established.

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How can mortality due to subsistence crises be measured? We note the scientific caution exercised by the author of the *Réflexions*. He starts out from a statement of fact, namely that years of exceptional corn prices coincide

with years of exceptional mortality, but goes on to point out that these years were also years of exceptional morbidity. It would thus be rather pointless in statistical terms to seek a specific difference between such closely linked phenomena: mortality from starvation alone, mortality from disease but attributable to malnutrition, and last, mortality by contagion, this contagion being inseparable from the state of dearth which contributed not only to the development of disease but also to its spread. In the modern era, apart from the extreme case of "physiological misery", what share of deaths can be attributed to food supply problems when the officially reported causes of death make no suggestion of this?

We can, on the other hand, define with precision the years of exceptional mortality in which excess mortality can be linked to a subsistence crisis. These years are easy to identify, since the scale of the phenomena is so large that concurring testimonies abound. Even historians with little interest in studying economic and social realities cannot be unacquainted with events such as those of 1693 or 1709. Indeed, the numerous monographs at our disposal leave no doubt as to the existence of a causal relationship between price rises, poverty and death.

But difficulties arise if we try to identify more clearly or to quantify this mortality. Statistics on population change existed during the Ancien Régime, but not until 1772, when the major mortality crises due to an exceptional rise in corn prices were a thing of the past. To study these crises, we need to move further back in time, to the reign of Louis XIV and earlier, when no such statistics existed. However, we do possess the registers of births, marriages and deaths – a vital source for all retrospective demographic studies. They are sporadic and often of doubtful quality up to 1667, but well-conserved and of generally high quality from 1667. The final years of Louis XIVth's reign thus appear to be the most favourable – or in any case the least unfavourable – period for research of this kind.

But a trap awaits us, which is so glaring that one wonders why so many excellent scholars have fallen into it, and so serious that it must be very clearly pointed out. We believe we know what we are saying when we talk about crisis years. But what practical reality does the word "year" refer to? Be they meteorological, agricultural, economic or demographic, the fluctuations we analyse are difficult to fit into the arbitrary framework of a "calendar year" starting on 1 January and ending on 31 December. Here, the difficulty is considerable. Exceptional corn price rises occur naturally within the crop year, but are severely distorted if considered in the framework of a calendar year.(1) But experience shows that the same applies to the mortality peaks observed during years of dearth. A rapid month-on-month analysis of the parish registers is sufficient to prove this point. Examination of deaths from 1 August to 31 July reveals increases that are much less visible under the habitual counting method.

(1) Readers are invited to consult our article in *Melanges d'histoire sociale*, volume V.

As a consequence, otherwise laudable publications such as those of Oursel (introduction to volume V of the Inventaire des archives de Dijon), of Brossard for Bourg-en-Bresse, and of Faidherbe for Roubaix, have become worthless, at least with regard to the question that interests us. If, as we believe, a more extensive extraction of data in the parish registers is to be undertaken, in a collective form and on a national scale, then we must require that the original records, which will need to be conserved, include a monthly count and that the published results provide totals calculated by crop year.

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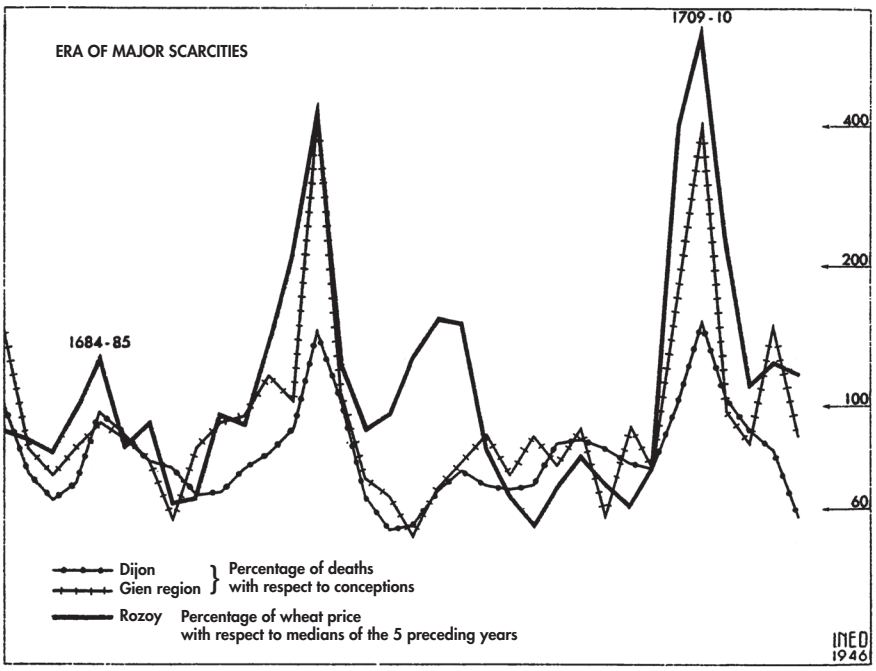
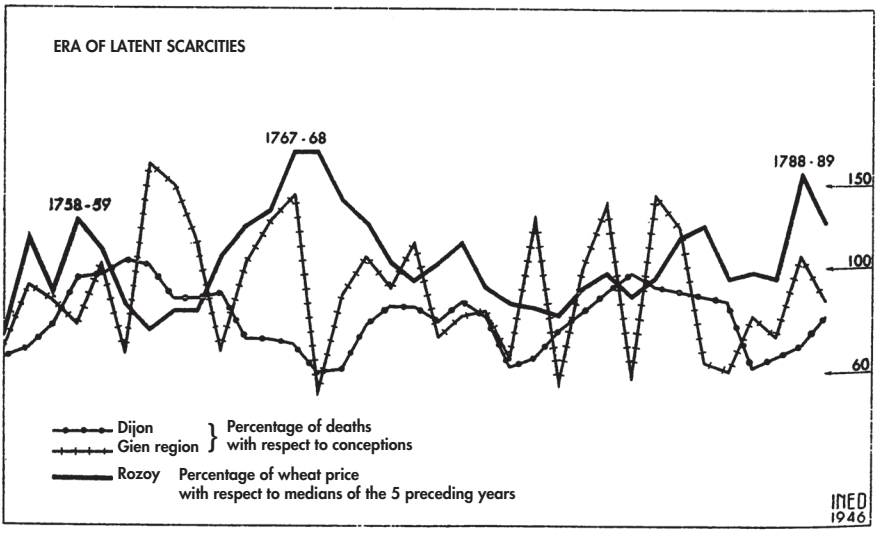
The study of conceptions provides a further argument in favour of our proposed reform. The fall in conceptions seems to have escaped the attention of scholars working on historical crises. It is nonetheless an indisputable and symptomatic fact. It can be observed by shifting baptisms backwards by nine months to follow numbers of conceptions month by month. We can thus obtain a graph that is doubly characteristic of a subsistence crisis year, in which an abrupt upsurge in deaths coincides with an equally abrupt decrease in conceptions.(2)

We may thus consider that the characteristic index of the crisis is the ratio of deaths to conceptions or, put another way, the percentage of deaths with respect to conceptions counted, if not monthly, then at least in the timeframe of a crop year. This index can then be compared, not against the price of corn itself, but against percentages that reveal the strength of the increase with respect to the immediately preceding time period. In the exceptional years that interest us, the increase produced a brutal effect, a shock effect, very distinct from the social effects of other economic fluctuations. It was felt above all by the lower classes who were living "from hand to mouth"; hence its immediate demographic repercussions, whose rapidity and intensity may evoke surprise. While wages and non-wage incomes were slow to adapt to a price increase – indeed, any price rise, even moderate, produced hardship – we can estimate that after several years this increase was absorbed, and that even if prices remained high, they were affordable to many. Moreover, the effects of scarcity that persisted without worsening were lessened by the fact that the weakest members of the population died within the first few months. Conversely, the opportunities made available to labourers during periods of low prices were often wasted by many among them. The texts that discuss such questions are often too partial to be trusted. While they very likely exaggerate the thoughtlessness and negligence of these "poor idlers", there is no doubt that after a period of low prices, a sudden increase was a rude awakening for many.

(2) We published a graph of this kind in the *Journal de la Société de statistique de Paris*, May-June 1944.





This is our justification for choosing the method used to plot the graphs presented here, in which the percentages of deaths with respect to conceptions in Dijon and in the Gien region are compared with the percentages of wheat prices in Rozoy-en-Brie with respect to the median prices observed in the five preceding years. We note that the fluctuations in percentages of deaths in Dijon are greatly attenuated by the artificial

transformation operated upon the data calculated by calendar year in order to render them comparable with those recorded by crop year.

This said, the results are quite clear and the comparison between two time periods, 1680-1713 on the one hand, and 1755-1789 on the other, is striking. The reign of Louis XIV was punctuated by subsistence crises of such a clearly exceptional nature that this characteristic alone would be sufficient to differentiate them. Correlatively, the ratio of deaths to conceptions presents peaks which, when the data were collected using the method described above, are of a comparable, and no less exceptional, intensity. The national character of the crisis is indisputable, and replacing the prices quoted on the Rozoyen-Brie market with the prices of Dijon would not make the concordance any more significant.

Under Louis XV, and even more so under Louis XVI, everything changed. There was no longer any apparent correlation between price spikes and demographic indices. While there was still a demographic problem of subsistence, it was of a very different order of magnitude, and this difference in quantity is already, in itself, a difference of quality. Between the era of deadly crises and the era of latent crises, a revolution took place, a major revolution that can only be mentioned briefly here and which remains to be studied.

Yet so far, we have simply used illustration to highlight known facts, and made a statistical review of the habitual historical documentation. Can we hope to go further one day, and measure the demographic consequences of subsistence crises? At first sight, this would call for extensive counts in diverse regions, since we would very likely detect major local variations in the degree of dearth. But before undertaking a project on this scale, we need to make a more detailed analysis of the phenomena at play.

"I buried twelve hundred corpses this dreadful year, dogs were eating the dead bodies they found scattered along the roadside". Let us not dwell upon the macabre scenes conjured up by this note which begins the register of Gien-le-Vieil for 1709. But, after a thorough count, we find only 241 deaths recorded between January and December, plus a further 17 who are mentioned anonymously, sometimes with their place of origin, but sometimes with no mention other than "poor beggar". In any case, we are far from the number of burials given in the initial note. Did the priest have an over-lively imagination? More probably, the figure of 1,200 was a gross approximation. Many deaths were not counted in the registers – deaths of strangers recorded neither in their parish of origin nor at their place of death, and hence documented nowhere.

To understand the importance of this observation, we must bear in mind that the historical population of France included, even in normal times, an immense proportion of *errants* (vagabonds), an expression borrowed from Mr Georges Lefèbvre and which is the evocative title of one of the chapters of his book on the *La grande peur de 1789* [The Great Fear

of 1789]. One could almost say that there were two peoples: the sedentary and the nomadic. And all the evidence points to the conclusion that the same coefficients of mortality, fertility and nuptiality cannot be applied to both populations. It was precisely the onset of famine that modified these coefficients, by swelling the ranks of the homeless, with professional beggars and odd-job men being joined by the newly dispossessed who, from then on, often remained permanently so.

In any case, it is impossible to make an accurate count of this floating population, so any direct enumeration of losses due to famine is bound to be flawed.

Are we at an impasse, then? In reality, only experience will tell us. With marriages, baptisms and deaths, we have three data series spread over time: we can always try to make use of them. Had the Ancien Regime administrators made accurate and frequent exhaustive censuses, the problem as posed here would be resolved. Of that there is no doubt. The difference observed between two censuses would give a clear enough picture of the effects of scarcity. For want of a better solution, can we make up for this absence of data by estimating population change? We have seen that this cannot be done for the actual years in which the crises occurred. But in normal times, even the most wretched vagabond rarely died without his death being registered, and even the least legitimate children were baptized. By working on sufficiently varied indicators and over a long enough period, it is certainly possible to gain an idea of population growth or decline. To the extent that the coefficients of nuptiality, disease and mortality can be considered as relatively stable, each of the three data series can be used as a basis for evaluation.

But it is clear that each of these coefficients is subject to secular change – of which the current period provides us with many memorable examples – and, moreover, may fluctuate momentarily under temporary influences of an accidental or cyclical nature. Scarcity upsets the composition of human populations and, as a result, the overall value of the coefficients. However difficult it may be to determine age-specific mortality, the sampling we have undertaken appears to indicate that mortality in years of dearth was quite different in this respect to that of normal years. Scarcity not only modified the age distribution after the crisis was over, but also substantially modified not only the number of marriageable individuals and the number of households capable of bearing children, but also the mean physical quality of each generation whose disease resistance was momentarily increased as a result of rigorous natural selection.

It is even more important, we believe, to consider the compensatory phenomena that occur in the aftermath of the crisis. I imagine that no-one would dream of calculating a country's demographic losses after a large-scale modern war by looking at pre- and post-conflict marriage statistics. However, over a relatively long period, the coefficient of nuptiality, in our

country at least, is among the least unstable. But everyone knows that the months that follow the cessation of hostilities are marked by a flurry of "delayed" weddings. The calculation would thus point to the absurd conclusion of a population increase.

Yet several phenomena of this kind can easily be detected in the aftermath of major subsistence crises by observing simple series of raw data. Deaths practically always fall sharply, so sharply in fact that it is difficult to explain this fall in relation to population size alone. We can only conclude that scarcity brought forward deaths that would have occurred in the following years. Conversely, we observe not only the existence of delayed weddings, but also a much larger number of conceptions. On our graphs, this surge in births, combined with the decrease in deaths, contributes, after its sudden rise, to an abrupt decrease in the ratio between the two. Finally, given the magnitude of these compensatory mechanisms, one wonders whether these terrible demographic crises were not, demographically speaking, surmounted within relatively few years, in which case, efforts to calculate their intensity by extrapolating upon previous conditions are quite vain.

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We are hardly in a position to avoid this objection, given the additional argument that a large share of the victims belonged to a very distinct demographic category, destined to disappear gradually without trace. This was a category where fertility was certainly low and infant mortality high, a category afflicted daily, even in normal years, by crises that had little impact on the sturdy bodies of ploughmen rooted in the land.

Among other qualities, the author of the *Réflexions* cited above had the merit of conducting a hospital survey. While the survey was small, one aspect of its findings is worthy of mention. In years of rising corn prices, the ratio of hospital deaths to deaths in the rest of the population was much higher than in a normal year. And this was true not only during the terrible price rises under Louis XIV, but also under Louis XV. In the years 1740 and 1741, there were 48,858 deaths in Paris, a quarter more than normal. But at the Hôtel-Dieu hospital, in these same two years, 15,085 deaths were counted, a number well over one-and-a-half times the 9,796 deaths recorded in two ordinary years. Note, however, that the "hospital" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was very different from the institution bearing that name today. It looked after sick people, but these people represented the morbidity of only part of the population. They were all penniless – those who were not "poor" in the strongest sense of the term, i.e. indigent, did not go to hospital. Scarcity, which took a massive toll upon these human beings, on the roads, in their hovels, in the barns where they sought refuge, and in the hospitals, simply concentrated within a few dramatic months a history which, at other times, played out through insignificant episodes of daily destitution.

SUBSISTENCE CRISES AND THE DEMOGRAPHY OF FRANCE

The great subsistence crisis, which, despite the confusion created by the expression, one is tempted to designate by its traditional name of "famine", disappeared under Louis XV. Yet it was not until much later, in the second half of the eighteenth century, that France saw a major upsurge in population growth, announcing the arrival of a new era. Indeed, severe crisis and latent scarcity existed side by side. This latent scarcity persisted even when market prices were not manifestly excessive. Given its permanent nature, this is perhaps the demographically most interesting aspect of the subsistence problem. But can one ever hope to address it? The year of scarcity, prior to Louis XV, is a precise item of data which can be used, up to a certain point, to make rigorous calculations. Beyond that, we find a complex situation of endemic unemployment and growing debt culminating in the seizure and abandonment of farms, in which, without doubt, the price of corn played a role. But it did not kill, either immediately or in a massive sweep; it was a slow process of erosion.

Jean MEUVRET