

Historical demography: beyond eurocentrism

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1. Introduction

The cornerstone of the beginnings of historical demography – family reconstitution *à la* Louis Henry – proved both easily replicable and useful to describe, explore and analyze the populations of the past. As a result, historical demography provided a critical reassessment of demographic processes, sometimes in addition and sometimes in opposition to demography itself. But in so doing, it also contributed in many ways to the shaping of a view of the historical evolution of demographic behaviour centred on the European (and in many instances simply the British or the French) experience. The demographic transition or the behaviour of the so-called pre-transitional populations were defined and conceptualized mostly with reference to European populations. Recently, an increasing number of studies are challenging the prevailing theories and views (for example, Bengtsson *et al.* (2004)). But much still remains to be done to ensure that this bias does not affect large spans of historical research (Goody 2006).

2. The demographic legacy of colonialism

One opportunity to test existing theories lies in studying the demographic legacy of colonialism. As time has passed since the end of colonial regimes, historians, as well as other social scientists (notably economists and sociologists), have started to build up a critical assessment of colonialism and the colonial legacy (among many works, see Austin (2007); Cogneau *et al.* (2016); Davis & Huttenback (2007)). Their self-proclaimed intention to move beyond the initial opposition of the pro- and anti-colonialist positions has been partially successful, although it is still, in various ways, a work in progress. Recently, historical demographers have also tried to explore the fate of colonial societies by taking up the challenge to collect all the various available sources – however biased they may be. Discussing their bias and limitations; reconstructing the context in which they were produced; and exploring their significance for the larger models that demographers have in mind

is even more challenging. But it is a task that is both necessary and rewarding, since it will expand our understanding of the ways populations interact with and are shaped by cultural, economic, political and/or social circumstances. Unfortunately, as expected, the most numerous and best quality data are on the colonizers themselves, not on the colonized. Moreover, both the data and the way they were produced are *a priori* tainted by colonial thoughts and perceptions. They therefore suffer from double selection: both the observed population and the way this population is observed are biased.

However, these limitations should not impair the study of colonial populations. On the contrary, they should be an incentive to develop critical tools and innovative analytical methods. Such tools and methods are needed all the more because the problem of double selection is in no way specific to colonial populations, but is a phenomenon that affects all historical sources. Think, for example, of the skewed distribution of information on socio-economic status groups: we know much more about the European upper classes of the past than about the average person, and even less is known about the penniless and the destitute.

But, for the sake of brevity, let us focus here on the example of colonial populations, and on what a better understanding of these populations may bring us. The way colonial populations experienced the mortality decline might, for instance, help us to understand the relative contributions of public policies, income growth and medical advances in this decline. Moreover, the long-run mortality decline happened at different paces and levels of intensity within populations: the gains in life expectancy varied between rich and poor; between men and women; between colonized and colonizers; between rural and urban dwellers; etc. Describing inequality within the decline of mortality is of the utmost importance to an understanding of the process itself. All this will help to discuss and re-assess the meaning of the current demographic models that draw so heavily (certainly too heavily) on the Western experience.

More than half a century since Louis Henry's initial work, historical demography must reinvent itself, if it is to survive. In that sense, the study of colonial populations forms one way in which two decisive challenges faced by the field can be overcome. The first is the risk getting carried away by the methodological advantages of 'big data', which in practice might give more importance to populations with more data available. The second, which is connected to the first, is the risk of linear thinking and a lack of attention for historical diversity. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss both of these challenges in more detail.

3. Big data

The rise of large individual micro-level datasets, such as those freely available on IPUMS, has started to dominate the field. Paradoxically enough, this feast of data mostly feeds those who were already well fed, since the majority of datasets

relate to countries already studied at great length. This can be explained by the quality of the original sources and by path dependency in constructing large-scale historical demographic datasets. The risk of this trend is that it will turn historical demography, once again, into the history of a few leading (and primarily North American and European) countries. A challenge for the very near future is therefore to move beyond these large datasets. Moreover, historical demography should not simply measure demographic behaviour in the past, but also take into account the broader historical (social, cultural, economic and political) settings in which this behaviour took place. In other words, demographic studies of the past should historicize past populations. A very good example of a recent study that perceptively places demographic processes in their context and explores the interactions between context and behaviour is Drixler (2013). Unfortunately, this historicizing task becomes an ever greater challenge as data have become more readily available, and there is an ever greater distance between those producing databases and those analyzing them.

4. Deconstructing models of modernity

The idea, or some might say the model, of a linear demographic transition linking modernity with various demographic outcomes (birth control, lower mortality, high urbanization, etc.) is still prevalent among many demographers – not to mention other social scientists. In truth, surprisingly little is known about both the details and the diversity of this process; for instance, who first started birth control and how? To further deconstruct linear models, historical demographers need to draw on various populations that have, so far, been too marginalized in research endeavours. Expanding our knowledge will prove useful to advance our insights in demographic behaviour, in both Europe and the world, in both the past and in the present. Developing our understanding of all the populations of the past – non-European populations, poor people from Europe and elsewhere, etc. – is therefore of the utmost importance for the future of historical demography.

References

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Biography

Lionel Kesztenbaum is a researcher at the French National Demographic Institute (INED). He is currently Co-head of the History and Population Research Unit at INED and associate researcher at the Paris School of Economics (PSE). His interests lie in economic history and historical demography, with focuses on inequality (differential demography according to wealth, income or social status), migration (the spatial distribution of the French population; migrations in colonial times), population ageing (the history of retirement and pension systems), and large historical databases (the TRA survey).