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Roger S. Schofield and E. Anthony Wrigley

Population and Economy: From the Traditional to the Modern World

This issue of *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* focuses upon some of the central problems in social and economic history. Until only a century or so ago land was the source not only of all food, but also of most of the raw materials needed by industry. In traditional agricultural economies, productivity per person, or per acre, was either stationary or rose very slowly. In such circumstances rapid population growth spelled disaster unless there were still large areas of virgin land to be exploited, a possibility that was no longer open to most societies in early modern Europe. For them the faster population grew, the grimmer became the struggle to exist. England was one such society, yet in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century it experienced a series of economic changes which overcame the earlier tension between population growth and living standards. Industrialization involved changes in productivity so profound that an increase in poverty was no longer the price of an increase in numbers.

An understanding of the nature of the dynamic relationships between population and the economy, and of their transformation through industrialization, is, therefore, one of the grand themes of history, illuminating the emergence of the modern world and providing a historical perspective in which the problems of contemporary agricultural societies can better be appreciated. Such an enterprise has hitherto been hampered by the lack of adequate information about European population movements over the long run.

With the publication of *The Population History of England* it became possible for the first time to trace in some detail the demographic changes that occurred in a major European country

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throughout the early modern period and during the industrial revolution. It is thus now possible to test our understanding of the functioning of early modern economies in relation to their demographic patterns against the newly revealed empirical data. The discussion of this central historical question, first initiated by Thomas Robert Malthus in the late eighteenth century, can now be taken a substantial step further. All of the essays published here take advantage of this new possibility, either by using the English data themselves, or by reflecting on the implications of a comparison between English patterns and those found elsewhere.[1]

The most significant and pervasive issue has been, and remains, the degree of autonomy of population characteristics. On the one hand there has been a long tradition, stemming from one reading of Malthus' work, of treating population behavior as secondary to economic circumstance. The commanding heights of the historical scene were economic. Once these had been scaled, the rest of the landscape could be surveyed and was subordinate. In particular, the demand for labor has often been seen as the variable which, over the long-run, has directly or indirectly determined population trends.[2]

Over the short run, too, demographic behavior in the past has often been considered to have been highly sensitive to economic conditions. For example, the size of the harvest exercised a powerful influence each year on the number of marriages. Goubert, in a flamboyant analogy, once went so far as to describe the price of wheat as a demographic barometer, the fluctuations of which above or below normal established the demographic consequences of the harvest year in question.[3]

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[1] E. Anthony Wrigley and Roger S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871. A Reconstruction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).

[2] "Every species of animals naturally multiplies in proportion to the means of their subsistence, and no species can ever multiply beyond it. But in civilised society it is only amongst the inferior ranks of people that the scantiness of subsistence can set limits to the further multiplication of the human species; and it can do so in no other way than by destroying a great part of the children which their fruitful marriages produce. The liberal reward of labour, by enabling them to provide better for their children, and consequently to bring up a greater number, naturally tends to widen and extend those limits. It deserves to be remarked, too, *that it necessarily does this as nearly as possible in the proportion which the demand for labour requires*" [our emphasis]. Adam Smith (ed. John Ramsay M'Culloch), *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Edinburgh, 1843), 36.

[3] Pierre Goubert, *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis de 1600 à 1750* (Paris, 1960), I, 75–76.

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On the other hand, causal priority could equally plausibly be reversed, since certain demographic characteristics of past populations could scarcely fail to have influenced economic behavior. For example, the age structure of a population, and therefore its dependency ratio, is largely determined by the prevailing level of its fertility. This factor in turn may have strongly influenced patterns and types of expenditure and saving.

The degree of autonomy involved in the functioning of population and economy in the past was an issue that was addressed directly in *Population History*. Peter Lindert and Ronald Lee both explore this question in their contributions to this issue. Lee, for example, makes a telling distinction between the short, the medium, and the long term. He shows the importance of the distinction to any discussion of the degree to which population characteristics are determined by the demand for labor, which he defines as itself arising from some combination of "technology, resources, climate, and the social organization guiding production and distribution" (636). He argues that, in the long run, demand for labor must have been the decisive factor; that, in the short run, other factors were often of greater importance; but that there are major uncertainties about medium term behavior, measured in decades or half-centuries. His analysis leads him to conclude that, in this time frame, it was *independent* variations in fertility and mortality which led to the marked long-term swings in population growth rates round the equilibrium rate suggested by the growth of the economy; and that such swings were strongly and negatively correlated with real income.

Lindert addresses much the same set of questions. Like Lee, he begins with Malthus and reflects upon the ways in which both subsequent empirical work and the changes in economic theory since the days of the classical economists have led to successive reassessments of the links between population movements and economic circumstances. Much of his discussion consists of an extended commentary on the battle between Malthusians and monetarists, in which he keeps a tally of the points scored as the fight develops, descending from time to time to intervene actively himself. He concludes that Malthus' original justification of the view that population growth and falling real wages were causally linked is difficult to sustain. However, he also suggests that the apparent domination of real wage trends by price behavior does

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not necessarily imply that population movements were unimportant in influencing real wages. He is led to this view by the consideration of a number of ways in which population trends may reenter the picture through their effect on prices and thus, indirectly, on real wages.

The essays by Lee and Lindert are preceded in this collection by another pair, by Schofield and Michael Anderson, which tackle questions of research design. In the former, Schofield sets out what might be described as the research philosophy of *Population History*. It is placed first in this collection since the book it describes was a catalyst for most of the other essays. He traces the intellectual ancestry of the enterprise back to Malthus' *First Essay on Population* (London, 1798) and also sets out its relationship to the more recent authors whose writings helped to shape its coverage and preoccupations: notably John Hajnal, Peter Laslett, Lee, H. John Habakkuk, and Vero Copner Wynne-Edwards. He is at pains to show that, in spite of the large proportion of the work devoted to "facts," it is a mistake to suppose that it is positivistic in nature. Indeed, he takes care to explain that the very status of a "fact" is contingent upon a prior set of assumptions about what is relevant; or rather, that a fruitful dialectic between fact and theory must inform and suffuse any successful piece of research.

Schofield also attempts to show that, when dealing with English population history, it is possible to borow with profit from the more traditional historical skills and from recent developments in demographic and statistical technique, or from economic theory, without at the same time introducing methodological contradictions or tensions. Equally, he describes how, for certain purposes, it proved more appropriate to use simple, intuitive models of reality rather than resort to elaborate and sophisticated constructs. His essay is a plea for the importance of avoiding both the Scylla of naively descriptive history, and the Charybdis of the more formal type of historical analysis in which the conclusions are effectively built into the assumptions used in devising the method of analysis or in constructing the model of reality employed. The challenge which he offers at the end of his article, that the tentative interpretations given in *Population History* should be tested, refined, and refuted, has been taken up vigorously by several contributors to this issue of the *J.I.H.*

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Anderson briefly discusses the implications of the empirical findings, if substantiated, of *Population History* for the research agenda of demographic, economic, and social history. He concentrates chiefly, however, on the epistemological status of the research design employed and on the weaknesses and limitations of some of the assumptions underlying the work. He begins by making a distinction between the reliability and validity of the data used, noting that, although open to objection on the first head, the book is largely immune from the kinds of doubt on the second which beset much econometric and sociological analysis based on the application of models of behavior to quantitative data. Although able to offer reassurance on this point, he raises a series of questions about the propriety of other aspects of the work, notably in connection with the disentangling of causation from coincidence; over the dangers of passing from patterns observable in the mass to assumptions about individual motivation; and over the likelihood that results obtained at the national level conflate opposing tendencies in different regions, sectors of the economy, or social groups. He enters a strong plea for the value of sociological sensitivity to context to offset and enrich the rigors of demometric and econometric analysis.

The essays of Jan de Vries and Wrigley systematically exploit differences of context by drawing international comparisons in order to throw light upon the nature of the preindustrial economy of Western Europe. The Dutch Republic was the *Wirtschaftswunder* of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, clearly the most successful economy of the age, in which the level of real wages was probably higher than anywhere else and much more resistant to the secular sag in standards of living that afflicted so much of Europe after 1550. As de Vries notes, there are major deficiencies in the Dutch registers as sources of information about population trends, but the outlines of Dutch population history are sufficiently clearly established to allow a comparison of the Dutch and English cases. He shows how the openness of the Dutch economy to external influences, because of its dependence upon trade generally and upon foreign food supplies in particular, ensures that models of the pattern of economic-demographic relationships which "save the phenomena" well enough when applied to England, need modification for use with Dutch data. In the course of constructing an alternative model which is more successful for the case of the Dutch Republic, he succeeds in clarifying the distinctiveness of the Dutch golden age and the nature of the weaknesses of the Dutch situation, which resulted in economic leadership passing across the North Sea for a time.

De Vries also played a major role in determining the scope of Wrigley's essay, for his work in establishing the chief characteristics of urban growth across the face of Europe between 1500 and 1850 made it possible for Wrigley to attempt international comparisons. Wrigley shows what further light can be shed on differential economic development in Europe by separating population growth into urban and agricultural components. There were not only striking contrasts between the overall rates of population growth in England and other European countries, but even more remarkable differences in rates of growth of certain population categories. Rural agricultural population in England grew less quickly than in France or Holland after about 1600, but rural non-agricultural population grew much faster. Patterns of urban growth in England and elsewhere afford still greater contrasts. By the second half of the eighteenth century, about 70 percent of urban growth in Europe was taking place in England alone, although only about 7 percent of the population lived there (709, Table 7). There were also important differences between England and the continent in the rate of growth in output per head of those engaged in agriculture.

Brinley Thomas sets these developments within the wider, and critical, context of the overcoming of constraints on the expansion of output, in the absence of which the industrial revolution could not have occurred. His essay continues the long-running debate about the key developments which enabled England to become the first industrial nation and, for a time, to achieve a dominant position in the world economy. He concentrates on points which have received too little attention, emphasizing, for example, the significance of technical developments in iron manufacture in the 1780s and 1790s, the prelude to a tremendous surge in the volume of its output and major reductions in its price. He lays stress especially on the importance of access to the products of agriculture in other lands, in his view a sine qua non of stable or falling food prices in a period of very rapid population growth. The links between the food basket of the

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English masses and the American prairies, the black earth regions of southern Russia, and the Argentinian pampas in the later nineteenth century are well known. Thomas pays due heed to these developments but also underlines the extent of English dependence upon Ireland at an earlier period, notably in the era of revolutionary and Napoleonic wars.

Finally, Ann Kussmaul's essay exemplifies the splendid opportunities afforded to those interested in econometric history by the large mass of representative demographic data which was culled from parish registers in the course of work on *Population History*. She uses the well-marked regional patterning of marriage seasonality and its changes over time as a guide to the changing pattern of regional agricultural specialization. Changes in the timing of a local seasonal peak in marriages, or in its acuteness, were related to changes in the balance of agricultural activities, and afford a valuable clue to developments in agriculture, especially as direct evidence on the subject is at best fragmentary. In order to exploit this fact with confidence, however, it is first necessary to show that the observed changes could not have been due to other factors, such as altered ecclesiastical rules or practices. Having cleared the ground in this way by discussing other influences on seasonality, Kussmaul is able to show both that there were substantial and significant changes and that they can be accommodated neatly into a model of increasing regional specialization of agriculture. She relates these developments in turn to the vast growth of London and the scale of transport improvements during the period.

Several of the contributors to this special issue contest some of the interpretations that were offered in *Population History*. Nor are they always in accord with one another. Lindert and Lee, for example, are at odds over the assumptions which should be made in erecting an econometric model of the preindustrial English economy. Wrigley takes issue with de Vries about the protoindustrial explanation for the pattern of urban growth from 1600 to 1750, at least for England. Such differences of view are to be welcomed, but it would be out of place to comment upon the merits of the varying views in this brief introduction.

There are, however, certain common features implicit or explicit in this group of essays to which attention should be drawn. All eight contributors to this issue are economic histori-

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ans. In their original training some were economists, some historians, and one a sociologist; yet all have also developed a strong interest in population history. All share a fascination with the circumstances which limited economic growth in preindustrial economies and with the train of events which led to the escape from these constraints with the occurrence of the industrial revolution.

In view of their intellectual background it is striking, first, that all the authors who consider the question are agreed in assigning a major independent importance to the demographic character of past communities in helping to determine economic conditions. Lee and Lindert address this issue explicitly but, in different ways, the same point is made by every author, except perhaps Kussmaul and Thomas, whose discussions do not involve this topic. Second, although in diverse ways, several of the essays pay tribute to the value of comparative history. Early modern Western Europe may have shared certain economic and demographic traits which set it apart from other traditional cultures, but it was nonetheless full of diversity.[4] In studying the economic, social, and demographic interrelationships in any one area or country, it is of great value to have similar data available for other places. Although only de Vries and Wrigley adopted an explicitly comparative theme, it is echoed in several other essays.

Third, the essays in this collection help to establish more fully the distinctiveness of the English experience. Although not all of the authors confront the question directly, collectively they represent a valuable contribution to a debate which has been lively in recent years. To know how far and in what ways English economic and demographic patterns diverged from those of continental Europe in the centuries before the industrial revolution; to establish how far industrialization simply continued past trends

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[4] For example, although patterns of nuptiality in Western Europe were distinctive, there were important differences in marriage characteristics among different parts of Western Europe, not simply in the timing and incidence of marriage, but in other aspects of marriage as a social and demographic phenomenon. On the general pattern, see John Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective," in David V. Glass and David E. C. Eversley (eds.), *Population in History* (London, 1965), 101–143. On the complexity of nuptiality differences between countries, in this instance England and France, see Wrigley, "Marriage and Population Growth in Eighteenth-Century England," in R. Brian Outhwaite (ed.), *Marriage and Society. Studies in the Social History of Marriage* (London, 1981), 174–185.

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a fortiori or how far it involved abrupt, new departures—resolving such questions is of prime importance to understanding how the modern world came into being, one of the most important of all historical enterprises. Although varied in character and design, the essays in this issue all throw light on these fundamental questions. Their nature explains the title given to this issue: *Population and Economy: From the Traditional to the Modern World*.[5]

[5] The debate on the distinctiveness of the English experience has flourished especially since the publication of Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism. The Family, Property, and Social Transition* (Oxford, 1978).

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Roger S. Schofield

Through a Glass Darkly: *The Population History of England* as an Experiment in History

> The power of a theory lies in its capacity to explain its refutations in the course of its growth.[1]

As its subtitle reveals, *The Population History of England* is a work of historical reconstruction. It was written as an attempt to discover the main outlines of English demographic history and to relate them to economic developments and to the social context in which population developments occurred. The book is also a manifesto for a particular approach to historical investigation and historical inference. Although some of the principles that informed the work were made explicit, many were not and may be difficult to discern in so long and involved a text. In this article I provide an account of the philosophy that lay behind the attempt.[2]

At first glance the book appears to be the outcome of a mammoth exercise in historical positivism: the reconstruction of English population history "wie es eigentlich gewesen" (as it actually happened). This impression is, to a certain extent, justified, for matters of demographic fact had been much discussed and disputed in the literature, and there was a need to recover the empirical record in more detail and with much greater precision than had been achieved so far. For example, it was generally agreed that the population had grown in the sixteenth century, and in the later eighteenth century, but there was no exact knowl-

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[1] Imre Lakatos, *Proofs and Refutations: The Logic of Mathematical Discovery* (Cambridge, 1972), 94.

[2] E. Anthony Wrigley and Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).