Demographic behavior in the past

A study of fourteen German village populations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

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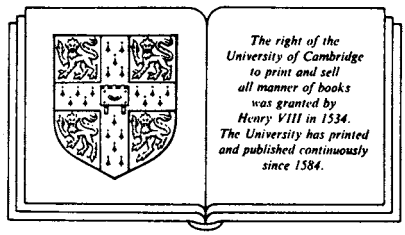

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1

Family reconstitution and the historical study of demographic behavior

European historical demography was revolutionized in the 1950s by the pioneering analyses of Louis Henry using data assembled through the technique of family reconstitution.[1] The technique involves a process through which individual records of births, deaths, and marriages (or baptisms, burials, and weddings) contained in parish registers are linked together into histories of vital events for individual families. The resultant micro-level set of linked information permits a far greater depth of analysis than is possible through earlier conventional approaches utilizing parish registers.

The earlier techniques relied primarily on simple aggregative counts of vital events. Thus the information available to the analyst was typically limited to annual or monthly time series of births, deaths, and marriages. These were used primarily to examine short-term fluctuations and their interrelationships. However, there was usually no basis to calculate demographic rates because, given the rarity and imperfections of census-like documents for much of the period covered by parish records, counts of the population at risk were generally

[1] Henry, *Anciennes familles génévoises;* Gautier and Henry, *Population de Normande.* For a discussion of the importance of family reconstitution to the development of historical demography, see Wrigley, *Population and history;* Flinn, *European demographic system,* Chapter 1; and Sharlin, 'Historical demography.' Probably the earliest study to make extensive use of family reconstitution data for demographic analysis was by Roller (*Einwohnerschaft der Stadt Durlach*) for the town of Durlach in southern Germany shortly after the turn of the century. Indeed, the value of family reconstitution data for demographic analysis was recognized in Germany considerably earlier than elsewhere and a number of historical demographic studies based on this technique were actually carried out. This work, however, had little impact outside of Germany at the time and has gone largely unnoticed by present-day demographers (Imhof, *Einführung,* pp. 20–29). Thus the credit for the breakthrough in the use of family reconstitution in modern historical demography belongs largely to Louis Henry and his associates.