

The Population of Europe

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This book is one of a series entitled *The Making of Europe*, which aims 'to address crucial aspects of European history in every field - political, economic, social, religious, and cultural' (p. xii). In this contribution to the series, Massimo Livi-Bacci attempts to produce a history of Europe's population from (roughly) the end of the eleventh century to the present day within the confines of a volume of about 200 pages. This looks like a fairly ambitious undertaking, the more so when we learn that by 'Europe', Professor Livi-Bacci means everywhere west of the Urals. Indeed one could question whether it is sensible even to try to generalise over such an extended period about a geographical area stretching from European Russia to Portugal. However, Livi-Bacci is experienced at painting big pictures. He is the author of *Population and Nutrition: an Essay on European Demographic History* (Cambridge, 1991), and *A Concise History of World Population* (second ed., Oxford, 1996). Someone who has tackled the world's population history in a book of about 200 pages is surely well equipped to tackle Europe's in roughly the same amount of space.

How, then, does he set about the task? First, he erects a framework within which to set his narrative. The framework sets individual or group choices against the constraints imposed by resources and the environment. He argues that this allows the story to be simplified because the constraints (space, the availability of land, epidemiology, etc.) change only slowly as a result of human intervention. The overall story is then about how human populations have adapted to those constraints, gradually freeing themselves more and more to behave as they choose. The beauty of this framework is that it can be used successfully for the whole of the historical period with which he is concerned.

The way Livi-Bacci views the 'constraints', however, is different from that adopted in much of the literature, especially that on the population history of England. The latter has become embroiled in long debates about the relative importance of forces internal to the demographic system (such as Malthus's preventive check) and exogenous forces (such as the 'autonomous death rate') in reining in population growth prior to the eighteenth century. One of these debates followed the publication of E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield's *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: a Reconstruction* (Cambridge, 1981). But this is a relative

newcomer compared with the long-running dispute (not specific to England) about whether the long period of population expansion during the Middle Ages was brought to an end by a Malthusian positive check at the end of the thirteenth century or by the 'exogenous' intervention of the Black Death in 1347-50.

Livi-Bacci seems to me to be saying that these debates miss the main point. Whether the constraints are 'endogenous' or 'exogenous' is not really the interesting question. What is interesting is how they limited the choices available to individuals and groups, and how populations responded to this. Populations in the past were never completely impotent. Land reclamation and attempts to intensify agricultural production have repeatedly been made over the centuries. Similarly, even though they did not possess prophylactic or therapeutic measures to combat diseases, populations did what they could to minimise their impact (sometimes successfully, as in the case of quarantine measures against plague in the seventeenth century). However, Europe's population history is not a story of continuous progress. Right up to the end of the nineteenth century there were setbacks, some of which were direct side effects of development. For example, in nineteenth-century Italy, public building projects and increased mobility of seasonal labourers facilitated the geographical spread of malaria. Similarly, pellagra spread in southern Europe during the early nineteenth century as more and more people became reliant on a diet based on corn.

Livi-Bacci's framework has another advantage. As he points out, 'the major factors of constraint - land availability, space, food resources, disease - are highly dependent not so much on the range of behaviours of different segments of the population as on the acceleration, density, and growth of the population as a whole.' (p. 17). In other words, the big story is of a clash between the *aggregate* impact of individual and group demographic behaviour (i.e. the consequences of choice), and the factors of constraint. This justifies his decision to step back quite a long way so as to be able to view Europe as a whole, and to avoid being overwhelmed by geographical detail (historical demographers have spent a lot of time during the last 40 or 50 years filling in this detail).

How does the story unfold? It breaks down into three periods, defined according to the rate at which populations were finding ways of expanding the demographic 'space' within which they could operate. Hence Livi-Bacci considers first the period up to 1800, when movement really was fairly slow and the constraints very strong. Then he considers the period between 1800 and 1914, when more rapid progress was made, but the factors of constraint still exerted quite a lot of power. Finally he looks at the period since 1914 when the population of Europe largely freed itself from the forces of constraint, and the factors of choice won the battle. These three periods are treated in different ways in the book. The first period occupies four chapters, and because the factors of constraint loom so large in this period, they drive the structure of this section. The second and third periods are each dealt with in a single chapter. That entitled *The Great Transformation (1800-1914)* is conventionally structured, with a section on mortality decline followed by one on fertility decline. Finally, in the chapter on the twentieth century, the demographic developments are treated more as a preliminary to a discussion of population policies and the impact of demographic change on social and cultural attitudes.

Let us consider these chapters in a little more detail. Chapter Two, on space and the geographical environment considers the various ways in which the European population has responded to the constraint of the continent's limited territory. During the Middle Ages, Livi-Bacci says, the main response was to expand the occupied territory by moving into new lands in the east and the south. This expansion was not, as has often been asserted, due primarily to 'push' factors, but was more due to perceived opportunities in the destination areas followed by the powerful reinforcing effect of chain migration. Later, European populations intensified and consolidated settlements (especially in the west of the continent) and reclaimed land for cultivation (though, away from the Netherlands, we should be wary of attributing too much importance to this).

Chapter Three, on the role of nutrition in constraining population growth in Europe before 1800 is very impressive. Livi-Bacci makes an elegant and powerful case for being sceptical of arguments that Europe's population in the past was chronically undernourished. Historical demographers of England have long accepted the fact that subsistence crises caused principally by malnutrition were very rare, and often

localised: that the 'famine' part of Malthus's positive check was not really a runner except in a very few exceptional years (for example 1558 and 1559). A plausible deduction from this is that general levels of nutrition in 'normal' years were some way above the margins of subsistence. Livi-Bacci shows that this was indeed true for most people throughout the majority of Europe in 'normal' years. What did distinguish regions from one another was the impact of short-term subsistence crises, which seems to have varied quite a lot: in England they had relatively little impact, yet in northern France their impact was severe, and they were more frequent. In this chapter, Livi-Bacci also makes the crucial (but often overlooked) point that the relationship between nutritional level and mortality is highly non-linear, so that only quite severe malnutrition is likely to inflate mortality substantially.

Half of Chapter Four, on mortality from disease, is devoted to the origins, demographic impact and eventual disappearance of plague. I agree with this emphasis. Historians have debated long and hard about the impact of the plague on various aspects of social and economic life, on the economic position of the poor, and so forth. These debates have tended to obscure its enormous demographic impact, and Livi-Bacci's stressing of this goes some way to redressing the balance. Moreover, his discussion of the likely causes of the disappearance of plague in the seventeenth century is persuasive. Other diseases are not neglected, though, and there is a very interesting discussion of the effects of syphilis, typhus fever and smallpox.

Much European historical demography has, in recent years, become dominated by the analysis of Malthus's preventive check, or the way in which variations in marriage practices influence the rate of population growth. Work on this topic stretches back to Hajnal's famous paper on 'European marriage patterns in perspective' (in D.V. Glass and D.E.C. Eversley (eds) *Population in History* (London, 1965)). In this paper, Hajnal drew a line across Europe from St Petersburg to Trieste to separate the area of late and non-universal marriage (to the west) from the area of early marriage (to the east). A detailed consideration of this issue is reserved for Chapter Five, in which Livi-Bacci looks at the different ways in which European population growth was kept within the bounds imposed by the factors of constraint. The overall population growth rate is the product of four components: fertility, nuptiality, mortality and migration. Prior to 1800, rates of population growth varied little across Europe. They could not vary much, since they were largely limited by the constraints outlined in the previous three chapters. Yet there was great geographical diversity in all the components taken separately. Livi-Bacci provides an excellent illustration of the working out of different combinations of the components in his comparison of the experiences of England, France and Germany in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For me, the most striking conclusion to emerge from this analysis relates to the divergent trends over time. Why was English population growth lower than that of France in the seventeenth century, but much higher in the eighteenth? Livi-Bacci shows that it was principally due to increased nuptiality and reduced mortality in England. The trend in the age at first marriage differed markedly between the two countries: it was falling in England throughout most of the eighteenth century, whereas it was rising in France. This temporal trend, and the fact that a high age at marriage had developed in England as early as 1600, marked England out as exceptional within Europe. Therefore, the idea of English exceptionalism, the spectre of which haunts so much of the historical demographic literature written about England, receives some support. What is still unclear (and Livi-Bacci has nothing concrete to offer here) is when the pattern of low nuptiality originated in England.

In Chapter Six, Professor Livi-Bacci looks at the European demographic transition. Ever since the model of the demographic transition was first put forward in the years between the world wars, demographers have been struggling to make it coincide with reality. Progress on understanding what happened to European societies between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries has been frustrated by a number of things. First, there has been a tendency to look at the decline of mortality and the decline of fertility separately. Second, there has been a desire to seek monocausal explanations (such as McKeown's thesis that a rising standard of living was the main factor behind the mortality decline). This desire has provided fuel for the long-running debate between those who argue that the fertility decline was due to a falling demand for children (an 'economic' account) and those who believe that ideational change (notably the diffusion of the idea of birth control) was critical (an 'cultural' account). Livi-Bacci takes all of this confusion and tries to organise it using his framework. In the case of mortality decline, he is only partly successful: in the case of

fertility decline, he is much more so.

Livi-Bacci argues that the mortality decline has to be seen as a weakening of the constraints. Whatever the role of Malthus's preventive check, ultimately, high mortality did bind the population of Europe in the past, and its decline created space for additional growth. Understanding the mortality decline, therefore, is a matter of understanding which of the constraints were weakened. McKeown arrived at his standard-of-living explanation of mortality decline by eliminating everything else. Livi-Bacci makes a strong and succinct case against McKeown's argument, but this begs the question of what was responsible for the decline (i.e. which factors did McKeown eliminate erroneously?). Here Livi-Bacci seems uncertain. His conclusion fails to suggest a clear alternative. This is a pity, because on the same page (p. 147) he makes the important point that industrialisation and urbanisation caused a 'slowing (or inversion) of the general trends towards declining mortality', as the population was redistributed from healthy rural areas to unhealthy urban ones. This, of course, is another example of the 'three steps forward, two steps back' nature of progress in removing the constraints. The implication of this, however, is that for those parts of the population whose environments did not change, mortality must have been declining even faster than overall figures indicate.

Whatever the reason for the decline in mortality, it led to the potential for rapid population increase. In a crucial paragraph at the end of p. 139 Livi-Bacci says that the demographic transition is 'a collection of reactions to rapid population increase' and that, if we view it in this way, many phenomena that are difficult to understand become comprehensible. This view of the demographic transition is strikingly similar to Kingsley Davis's idea of multiphasic responses which was proposed in 1963 (though Livi-Bacci does not mention Davis's paper). However, it seems to have been forgotten by demographers, and Livi-Bacci is absolutely right to bring it back to centre-stage. Its power is illustrated by his analysis of the French experience. The decline of fertility in France as early as the end of the eighteenth century (a dreadful problem for those who would like to stress the influence of industrialisation and urbanisation in promoting fertility decline) is explained by turning the conventional account on its head. It was partly because France did *not* industrialise (or experience emigration) to the same extent as Britain or Germany that fertility had to be controlled, since there was no other way of absorbing the population growth caused by lower mortality. In Britain and Germany, by contrast, industrialisation, urbanisation and emigration across the Atlantic created new economic opportunities both at home and abroad for the expanding population, so birth control was not necessary until much later.

The final chapter of the book deals with the era since World War I. This chapter has a different flavour to the previous chapters, in that emphasis is laid on the consequences of demographic trends. Professor Livi-Bacci begins the chapter by saying, in effect, that there is very little more to explain: since 1914 mortality and fertility have continued to decline until they reached levels close to replacement level. However, this ignores the whole question of the 'second demographic transition'. I can understand why Professor Livi-Bacci chooses to ignore this - save for a brief mention in the notes - yet I think it does make the book incomplete. For the recent decline of fertility in much of Europe to levels well below replacement is something which I do not think models of the demographic transition would necessarily have predicted. It would have been nice to have seen some kind of discussion of to what extent what has happened to the population of Europe during the last 40 years or so marks a new departure: that is, something which is not part of the classical demographic transition model.

This omission, however, detracts but little from the overall excellence of the book. Many demographers and historians might feel that to attempt such a synthesis within the confines of 200 pages is a brave - even a foolhardy - thing to do. Professor Livi-Bacci has not only attempted it but has, very largely, brought it off. Even more impressively, he has succeeded in shedding new light on familiar happenings. I would most heartily recommend this book to any historian interested in a general overview of the subject.

By way of a postscript, I think it is apposite to make some comments about style. This book is aimed both at academics who are not specialists in the subject and at 'lay' readers. Its style reflects this. Academic readers will not find masses of numbered footnotes (indeed they will not find any numbered footnotes at all) but will find an appendix in which further reading is described. This appendix runs parallel to the main body of the

text and lists the sources of direct quotations in roughly the order in which they appear in the text, but without direct cross-referencing. I found this easy to use as a bibliography and a source of further reading. However, also incorporated into this appendix are other details, such as definitions of technical demographic terms. I really think that these details - which are not very numerous but are quite important - would have been better placed as footnotes. Hidden away in the further reading as they are, some readers may not find them at all, especially as the index does not always help locate them. The range of further reading described in the appendix is very wide. It includes a host of references about the population of different parts of Europe, written in a variety of languages. It is an excellent compendium for the interested reader to follow up.

Finally, congratulations are due to Cynthia and Carl Ipsen for their translation. The readability of the English text is a testament to the quality of their work.

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