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# A Problem of Great Importance: Population, Race, and Power

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The modern state is defined by its capacity to classify and order its peoples, argues James Scott in his seminal *Seeing Like a State*. To do so, officials needed to count the population and estimate its future growth. Karl Ittmann explores the rise, fall, and frustrations of colonial demography in the 20th-century British Empire. In the first historical examination of that now-deceased social science sub-field, Ittmann argues that population experts, in and outside of government, were crucial to the imperial state?s interventionist efforts to control its colonies and retain the Empire?s great power status. The power of science would help the state manage its peoples, if only they could account for them.

Colonial demography grew out of the nexus of the eugenics movement, birth control advocacy, and increased colonial intervention in society in the early 20th century. For the next 50 years it remained a mix of public and private initiatives, because, one, the state never provided enough funds to fully support the ideas and policies of its officials determined to resolve the ?problem of colonial population? (p. 15) and, two, private interests attempted to push and pull the limited funds of the colonial-imperial state toward their goals. Eugenicists supported qualitative reproduction, expanding desired (that is, white) populations while reducing (or at least slowing the growth of) undesirable (non-white) populations. Birth control advocates

saw ?family planning?, or providing women (and men) with the means to limit their size of their families, as the way to slow population growth. Both groups worked with like-minded colonial officials to shape the size of colonial populations. For officials, colonial demography formed one of several initiatives attempted in the 20th century to unite an agglomeration of metropolitan and colonial domains into a single, powerful empire-state. They understood population control as a way to direct the colonial populations into the desired directions that policymakers wished they would go. Sometimes it meant ?assisted? migration, whether supporting the emigration of Britons to the Dominions or removing Kenyan ?squatters? to reserves. Other times it meant adapting unlegislated discriminatory colonial migration control methods to the Home Isles (pp. 131-32). In the minds of policy advocates, the ?problem of colonial population? fluctuated throughout the period, with the British Isles, Dominions, India, or crown colonies sometimes conceived as underpopulated but mostly overpopulated.

Throughout *A Problem of Great Importance* Ittmann takes the reader through two separate-but-related paths from the end of the First World War to the end of empire in the early 1970s. First, he connects the growth of demographics as a social science field to the needs of the imperial state to predict future population growth and thereby ?correctly? allocate its human resources globally. Second, he tracks the policies undertaken by officials to achieve some sort of control over colonial populations. Race served as their main guideline: Britons (whites) in the Home Isles and Dominions needed to expand their populations; natives (non-whites) needed their populations ?controlled?. All policies however, particularly after the Second World War, had to appear color-blind despite their underlying racial biases. White rulers could not be identified as asking blacks to lessen the number of their children. Religion got in the way too, as the imperial state continuously felt unable to support birth control in fear of angering the Catholic Church and losing an ally that supported the colonial status quo. State intervention increased, in fits and starts, in the 1930s, before the Second World War, and more consistently after in 1940s and 1950s. With the development by American academics in the early 1960s of demographic transition theory, which ties population growth to modernization stages, colonial demography withered away. With the end of empire, British ?expertise? on demographics transferred into the international arena through former officials? participation in such organizations as the United Nations and International Planned Parenthood Federation. Ittmann concludes that colonial demographers and British officials could never ?control? their populations because they could not see the main cause of perceived under- or overpopulation: the lack of social and economic support from the imperial state for its colonial populations.

> The failure of the British to create an infrastructure of health services and education in the empire made the implementation of population policy at the local level virtually impossible (p. 193).

A highlight of Ittmann?s work is how he shows the continuities across decolonization, a point that Jordanna Bailkin also explored in *The Afterlife of Empire* (1), an earlier publication from the new *Berkeley Series in British Studies*. Former colonial officials took their expert knowledge in colonial, now re-termed ?Third World,? issues to international organizations, where they could promote similar policies without the political baggage that came with imperial rule. Former colonies like India and Pakistan could implement population control techniques, such as birth control and sterilization, that the imperial officials would discuss internally but never suggest publicly. Scholars need to remember that decolonization happened within the working lifetimes of a large number of individuals. Life did not stop because empire ended. They took their experience and knowledge elsewhere. New states did not start their post-colonial lives with a clean slate but rather absorbed in their new administrations those tools of governance, such as established laws, bureaucracies, and organizational structures, the colonial state had implemented. Decolonized states built upon imperial forms of population control. I hope that future works on the 20th century will continue to explore the continuities across decolonization, both of individuals and states.

Ittmann shows some of the issues that developed in 20th-century imperialism, when proponents of a constructive imperialism at the center attempted to homogenize administration over various, far-flung

colonies. For population control advocates, the main problem concerning implementation of policies came from the London-local divide in colonial rule. Both the metropole and the locality knew what was best for the colonial populations, justified through, respectively, expert knowledge and practical experience. This argument, of how officials justify their policies, occurs throughout widely-spread administrations. Can learning outweigh experience? It?s a question with no good answer. In addition, I like how Ittmann clearly shows that officials knew the difference between public pronouncements and private concerns, with race as the driving factor in colonial demographic policies. While officials since ancient times have spoken out of both sides of their mouths, it became a more essential practice in the 20th-century world of nation-states, where the state is supposed to rule in the name of the people. Here the complexities came from an empire-state ruling in the names of many peoples, however ones that officials evaluated at different levels of worth to the state.

Ittmann tells an important story, one pertinent to all modern states: how the state develops its means, both intellectually and practically, to shepherd its population. And since the end of empires, as more and more states move through the demographic transition, the world has achieved some sort of population control alongside progressive human development.(2) But I did not learn from this book as much about the science of demography as I expected to. What do demographers actually do, if only briefly? How do they count and estimate populations, and how have their methods changed over the 20th century? On a book about the history of coal-mining, a short section would explain how miners bring the coal out of the ground before delving into the political consequences of coal and mining. Perhaps Ittmann made the assumption that his readers would know how demographers count, but I wanted to understand their methods alongside their political motivations.

The main criticism that I have of Ittman is that his book on the history of a social science sub-field reads a little too social science-y to me. Where are the people that demographers count, those men and women who migrated, were resettled, used or rejected condoms and other birth control devices, and so forth? For a book on population control, the people controlled were absent. Ittmann openly states that his book provides a view of the world from the perspectives of demographers, eugenicists, birth control advocates, and officials. However I would have liked to have learned more about the human impact of their attempts at population control.

In conclusion, *A Problem of Great Importance* is a fine book on the ins and outs of policy formation, one albeit that did not work for a state that no longer exists. Anyone concerned with the history of demographics, applied science, government administration, decolonization, and the British world in the 20th century should read this book. It demonstrates the complexities of imperial rule, of competing interests in and outside of government shriving to maintain the Empire?s geopolitical position by slowing down (or speeding up) population growth. It also shows how the centuries-old ambiguities of British imperial rule, of a liberal but coercive empire, were resolved with decolonization. With the empire dissolved, the liberal interests behind British internationalism, the Empire?s attractive soft power, could advance without the need (or ability) to apply hard power. Those interests, to better the world, one person (or one child less) at a time, were funneled into international organizations like the United Nations and its related agencies. For good and bad, the liberal empire can be identified as not only a forerunner of a United States-dominated world but also of international organizations.

## Notes

1. Jordanna Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (Berkeley, CA, 2012).Back to (1)
2. The most recent UN report foresees the slowing of growth rates over the remainder of the twenty-first century, while absolute numbers will continue to climb. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision* (2013) < http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/index.htm [2]> [accessed 16 May 2014].Back to (2)

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