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The Measure of Multitude: Population in Medieval Thought

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'Noonan did not read polyptychs, and Duby did not read these penitentials.' (p. 185). In other words - as Peter Biller was observing in this one of a multitude of pithy asides that enliven *The Measure of Multitude* - the pre-eminent modern historian of contraception apparently did not bother himself too much with the raw materials of Carolingian economic and social history, nor did one of the twentieth century's most prominent economic and social historians spend much time with the texts of early-medieval pastoral precepts. Or, more broadly still, the intellectual paradigms of modern historians of medieval thought do not usually overlap with those of modern historians of medieval society, economy, and population, a point with which it is difficult to argue. And yet Biller's agenda in the most fundamental sense in this book is to redress that divide, and to follow (as he himself acknowledges) in the recent tradition of historians like Brian Tierney and John Baldwin, who seek what might be called a newly contextualized style of the history of medieval thought, one that aims to re-insert that thought into the context of the real world in which the theologians, canonists, and natural philosophers of the middle ages actually lived.(1)

In his disarmingly autobiographical preface Biller sets out his questions quite simply: did medieval writers develop a body of knowledge and ideas that were 'demographic', that correspond in some recognizable way

with the concerns and concepts of modern demographers? And if the answer to this first question is 'Yes', then to what extent can we imagine that that was the result of a hermetically-sealed thought system, or (conversely) to what extent was it the product of these writers' observation of the 'real world', and its demographic realities, in which they lived? Part of the problem is semantic: if the very word 'démographie' is a nineteenth-century invention (in much the same way that 'feudalism' was first coined centuries after the social and legal arrangements it describes had come into being), then one must be exceptionally careful to respect the mental categories that medieval intellectuals actually used, a point that Biller is repeatedly at pains to emphasize. When Bonaventure lectured on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* in the mid-thirteenth century, he did not enquire about sex ratios at birth exactly, but did debate with himself the proposition, 'whether there would have been an equal multiplication of men and women' (*Utrum aequalis fieret multiplicatio virorum et mulierum*) (p. 92). Or, as Nicholas Oresme glossed Aristotle's *Politics* in the fourteenth century, the concept of runaway population growth in relation to resources in particular places - and whether governments can or should do something about it - becomes

And for this purpose, that the people should not multiply so greatly that it does not have enough upon which to live, it is appropriate to bring moderation and measure into this, according to philosophy and as best as one can through good laws and ordinances. And in many different ways according to the differences and diversity of regions and times and the conditions and customs of men. (p. 318)

And so on, 'multitude' (*multitudo*) standing roughly for demographers' 'population'. Biller shows beyond any reasonable doubt (despite his own extreme caution and an almost rueful afterword in which he wonders whether he did manage to do so) that 'demographic' concepts and modes of thinking did indeed begin to permeate the writing of many medieval intellectuals - indeed, not as a unified body of knowledge or analysis, not by any means always connected or coherent, but rather as a result of cross-fertilization from a wide variety of sources and causes that resulted in 'populationist' strands of thinking imbedded into texts that were often predominantly focused upon other topics.

The development of this thought had a distinctive chronology, and the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries were its crucible. There were many factors that coalesced to stimulate it. Among the most critical (in this as of course in most other aspects of medieval Western thought) were the recovery and reception of Greek and Arabic medicine and natural and moral philosophy, particularly Aristotle and Avicenna ('The most important development in the intellectual history of Latin Christendom in the central middle ages was translation': p. 254). By 1300 (as opposed, say, to 1000) intellectuals had available to them a sophisticated body of systematic observations about, for instance, the different lifespans of animals and humans, individually and in groups, or what influenced the tendency to have male as opposed to female offspring.

Equally important were other things very specific to time and place. The impact of the Mongols, the beginning of attempts to send missions to China, and the dismal prospects for future Crusades, were interwoven with a kind of nascent population geography: compare and contrast the low population density of north-central Asia with the cities of Cathay, speculate (with fear, envy, or prurience?) about why Muslims seemed to have higher birth rates than Christians and how the Holy Land ought to be re-populated by the latter. Scholastic minds attempted to bring new clarity to old problems stemming from the Christian sense of historical time: why did the Old Testament reveal such long lifespans and why was polygamy allowed 'then', and why are things different 'now'? (The answer, as Lombard's later commentators elaborated from Patristic sources, was that 'then' - after the Creation and the Flood - the admonition to 'increase and multiply' and to fill up the numbers of the elect was a precept, but 'now' monogamous marriage is an indulgence and virgins please God.)

Other factors specific to time and place were important, too. One was the newly aggressive stance by the Western Church, after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), toward pastoral duties. These included more regular and more probing auricular confession by laity, and produced a burgeoning genre of guides and manuals for confessors and sinners, including searching questions into sexual practices and particularly contraceptive practices. Along with this there came to be something like a 'sociography' of sin - a catalogue of notions about the particular vices to which particular kinds of people were likely to tend. Biller's handling

of this literature and these issues embedded in it is remarkable and compelling, of enormous importance to social historians; in particular, and following on from previous studies of his which were precursors to this book,(2) he hints at how different regions of Western Europe might, just possibly, have produced demonstrably different nuances of emphasis in attitudes toward marriage and childbearing. At the same time a just-recently-developed canon law of marriage, and (equally importantly) the development and regularizing of ecclesiastical legal jurisdiction over laity (which Biller, not entirely accurately, sometimes terms 'marriage courts': pp. 69, 164), resulted in a new practical urgency to the disentanglement of conundrums surrounding matrimony's purposes.

What is most distinctive in Biller's contextualized intellectual history of medieval demographic thought, however, are his always-cautious reminders of another factor distinctive to the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries when this thought was developing. That is the rise in population that most of Western Europe was experiencing in exactly that same period, along with its social and economic consequences. Biller argues the case that the connections were hardly abstract or circumstantial. William of Auvergne was Bishop of Paris from 1228 to 1249; in around 1228 he produced a treatise, *On the sacrament of marriage*. Not entirely within the mainstream of thirteenth-century writing about matrimony, William's treatise ranged from contrasts between Christian marriage and family on the one hand to Jewish and especially Muslim marriage and family on the other (and his arguments 'recall the spirit of western fantasizing about Saracens and sex': p. 63), on to speculation about the appropriate size of families for people in different stations in life and the lower fertility that Parisian prostitutes seemed to exhibit. At more or less the very same time, William the bishop was having to cope with the consequences of the exploding population of Paris: very real consequences such as the need to create new parishes.

In similar manner - in a kind of coda to the book - Biller looks at a variety of writers from pre-Black Death Florence. Near the end of the thirteenth century, the city began a third circuit of walls to encompass its proliferating inhabitants. Here, unlike the case in the rest of the book, Biller draws from lay voices, most notably Giovanni Villani and his famous early-fourteenth-century *Nuova cronica* detailing the city's people and (in effect) its demographic history, and Dante's vision of the city in cantos 15-16 of the *Paradiso*, the ideal and the corrupt Florence, where

At that time all who were there, between Mars

and the Baptist [i.e. within the city's boundaries], capable of arms, were but the

fifth of the now living ones. (p. 417)

Biller's observation: 'What is significant is that some sort of number is penetrating everywhere' (p. 402). Moreover, here for the first and only time he raises what earlier in the book had been a latent issue: given for the most part only clerical writers' texts (as the texts of writers on natural philosophy, theology, canon law and pastoral guidance axiomatically were), what do we deduce about the scope of their conceptual framework beyond the clergy and into the laity? Here, at the last, he allows himself one further speculation: that the flow was not one-way (clerical to lay) but bi-directional (as lay experience provided the circumstantial frame of reference within which, for instance, preachers had to situate themselves to be intelligible).

Throughout the book, Biller has relatively little to say about what modern demographic historians believe we do or can 'know' about medieval populations; he summarizes some of the available writing briefly, but his intention is not to dwell upon it. Nonetheless it forms the constant background refrain for the point that the realities of world inhabited by his writers cannot be dismissed; circumstantial though it might be, there are, if handled subtly, real possibilities of perception in watching the writers grapple with increasing sophistication with the problems suggested by that world. Though this passage deals specifically with the reception of Aristotle's *Politics*, it can stand as an example of the ever-cautious interrogation Biller brings to all his sources:

When putting the demographic elements in the *Politics* and medieval western reactions to them side by side, and noting what western thinkers received in the *Politics* and what they added, there are two questions which are our real concern. What is shown about these men's existing patterns of thought and thus what they were already, to some degree, in the habit of thinking? Beyond that is the more elusive matter: what went on in their minds as their reading of the *Politics* came up against those demographic realities of the world in which they lived which were most deeply impressed upon their minds? (p. 311)

So, then, the answer to the second question raised above must remain circumstantial and suggestive. Nonetheless, this is a stunning and important book. The sheer weight of the careful exegeses of the sources and their evolution is massive; the constant caution about terminology, about the often unpredictable trajectory of novelty in medieval intellectual evolution, the care given to (for lack of a better word) the traditional concerns of the medieval textual scholar, are equally impressive. Biller is also immensely appealing in his style: witty, even quirky at times, seldom boringly linear, and exemplified by these three sentences from one paragraph:

The matter now moved to what was, when it met, the largest talking-shop of Latin Christendom. At a council which was about to try to depose him, Frederick's name was mud. The buzz made by this session can still be picked up in the Burton Annals report. (pp. 229-30).

In short: an author sometimes seemingly having more fun than is quite fair, but a reader sharing in it, and a book that is too exceptionally important to be read only by intellectual historians.

Notes

1. Most notably, Brian Tierney, *Medieval Poor Law: A Sketch of Canonical Theory and Its Application in England* (University of California Press: Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1959), and more recently John Baldwin, *The Language of Sex: Five Voices from Northern France around 1200* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1994).Back to (1)
2. For instance, P.P.A. Biller, 'Marriage patterns and women's lives: a sketch of a pastoral geography', in P.J.P. Goldberg, ed., *Women is a Worthy Wight: Women in English Society c. 1200-1500* (Sutton: Stroud, 1992), pp. 60-107.Back to (2)

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