LINKING THE LOCAL AND THE GENERAL IN POPULATION HISTORY:
PRIORITISING MIGRATION

Richard Smith

The late Michael Postan over 70 years ago, in a short but characteristically pithy essay on history and the social sciences, drew the telling contrast between general sociology and its preoccupation with ‘macro-cosmic’ subjects and antiquarian history with a preference for ‘microscopic’ approaches that were distinguished by a sort of ‘intellectual agoraphobia’, resulting in a focus on what he termed ‘small dark subjects’. Postan, of course, was highly critical of both extremes and saw the essence of historical approaches as being ‘microcosmic’, in that by focusing on the measurement of processes at a smaller scale it becomes possible to understand how larger patterns come about. It might be claimed that Local Population Studies from its inception would have gained Postan’s approval in that so much of what has been published in the journal has indeed been microcosmic in its ability to illuminate processes and practices at a parochial level and thereby better to comprehend those issues that have a significance at higher geographical levels of regional and indeed national aggregation. In fact the revolutionary approaches to the use of the parish register that occurred in the course of the 1960s form an extremely powerful instance of the issues with which Postan grappled. As a result we now know far more than we could have ever expected to do before the onset of a system of civil registration about marital fertility, marriage ages, age specific mortality, prenuptial pregnancy and a host of related issues from exploiting the registers that Thomas Cromwell brought into being in 1537. The contribution of local population historians to our knowledge of these matters is a source of envy among historical demographers working in most other countries.

One feature that is suggested by findings from studies undertaken at the level of the parish is the muted variation from place to place in some central aspects of demographic behaviour, notwithstanding some variation in others. Marital fertility appears to have been surprisingly similar from place to place, and represents a feature that has been seen as indicative of a relative ubiquity in the propensity of mothers to breastfeed well into the child’s second year of life, thereby giving rise to a strikingly regular pattern of birth intervals. Marriage age trends may also have been distinguished by wider local similarities than contrasts, and represent a trait that might have been expected to have varied more markedly geographically than has proven to be the case. Infant mortality, particularly in the last half of the first year of life, and early childhood mortality, are known to have been far more geographically varied than measures of fertility and nuptiality, reflecting environmental contrasts that almost certainly had striking implications for survival chances. Nonetheless, trends over time in infant mortality are also surprisingly consistent from place to place. Of course, it can be argued that the aforementioned generalisations might still be premature until we
have many more parish-based family reconstitutions to underwrite them. Such cautions would be extremely wise, and only the foolhardy would not continue to want to know far more about place to place variations in such demographic measurements.

Notwithstanding such uncertainties it would seem clear that, unlike many parts of continental Europe, variation from place to place in demographic parameters of fertility and mortality are relatively muted in the English setting. This is not the place to reflect in depth on this issue, but it remains a feature of the demographic regime in England that persists through much of the nineteenth century falls in marital fertility when comparisons are drawn at a broader European level. Such geographical similarities might seem odd given that parish and regional demographic growth rates varied enormously and suggest above all that the demographic characteristics that most differentiated places from each other were the propensities of individuals to migrate and the extent to which places were net exporters or importers of people. At a national as well as local level the role of migration was central. The worsening of mortality and lowering of fertility over the seventeenth century, while driving down national population growth rates and totals, were greatly exacerbated both by the redistribution of the population increasingly into urban areas (notably London) and the relatively high rates of emigration from England as a whole.

But for too long migration has been treated as a shadowy variable that is recognised as having been important but not susceptible to measurement in the manner of the more conventionally researched historical demographic variables. If migration has figured in discussions, it has done so most prominently in the debates about the demographic characteristics of individuals retrievable through family reconstitution who for the most part do not display life-time migration in comparison with those who did leave or enter parishes after birth or marriage. However, means of capturing movement into and out of parishes, both with reference to parish register-based analysis and through use of a variety of other sources (and in particular through a better understanding of the operation of the poor law and the laws of settlement) remain high priorities for local historical research. Local population historians have indeed made significant contributions to such issues, particularly using the enumerator schedules of the nineteenth-century censuses, but there is much to be done, particularly for earlier periods, if we are both to understand how the national population stabilised at around 5 million in the seventeenth and how it generated enormous regional variations in growth rates over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The study of migration, for far too long a cinderella in the research interests of population historians, is deserving of pole position in the research outputs of future generations of local population historians who wish to make microcosmic contributions to their subject.

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