
LPSS Autumn conference report, 2010

Occupation and life experiences

The LPSS Autumn conference gathered at the University of East Anglia in Norwich on Saturday 6 November 2010 for a stimulating and engaging meeting, with six speakers whose focus ranged from the highly statistical to the use of qualitative sources such as autobiographies.

Dr Leigh Shaw-Taylor of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure (CAMPOP) gave a paper entitled 'Occupational structure of England and Wales 1676–1881' with a focus on male occupations. Dr Shaw-Taylor explained that the paper was a summary of research conducted over the previous seven years and, while he was presenting the paper, many people had been involved in this research. He suggested that recent literature has posited that the Industrial Revolution was a slower process than had previously been supposed. Therefore, there is a need to have a clear picture of occupations in earlier times. Male occupations were researched using Tony Wrigley's coding of primary, secondary and tertiary industries, thus: Primary Sector: agriculture, forestry, estate work, fishing and mining; Secondary Sector: manufacture, construction and handicraft, anyone making anything; Tertiary Sector: all services, transport, retail, wholesale, professional, clerical, hospitality, government and military.

The results rely on a data-set of about 1,000 parishes with northern and urban areas over-represented. The bias in the sample towards the Secondary Sector had been to some extent corrected, but there was a difficulty in classifying labourers. The speaker acknowledged that estimates for earlier than 1730 are provisional. It was found that agricultural occupations declined throughout the period, and that there was little change in the rate of growth or geography of manufacturing industries after 1851, as expansion was largely complete by the end of the eighteenth century, and thus growth preceded mechanisation. The evidence from the CAMPOP study is that while in the eighteenth century the textile industry collapsed in the south it played an increasing role in the north. This was accompanied by a decline in adult male employment, indicating an increased reliance on centralisation. There was a real structural shift from primary to tertiary industry which increased from 18 per cent in 1817 to 28 per cent in 1871, following little change in this sector's share of employment in the seventeenth century.

Dr Shaw-Taylor summarised the eight key conclusions drawn from the research so far. First of all, the estimates are more robust than the revisionism of Lindert and Williamson on the figures of Gregory King (and Crafts), suggesting that the secondary sector was more important in 1700 than believed to date. Second, much of the growth of the

secondary sector appeared to happen prior to 1710; tentative evidence suggested that the key time period was the end of the seventeenth century. Third, estimates made for c. 1700 were provisional and much more work would be needed to produce more robust national estimates. Fourth, only modest growth in the secondary sector in the north of England could be shown in the eighteenth century and this was largely completed by 1785: therefore, this growth preceded mechanisation rather than accompanied it. Fifth, apart from London, the south of England experienced de-industrialisation in the eighteenth century. The collapse of textile production could explain this with the decline in male workers involved in clothes production exaggerating the effect. Sixth, after 1817, tertiary sector growth predominated, whereas between 1710 and 1817, it appeared stable. This conclusion might need to be revised as research proceeds. Seventh, it would appear that the growth of secondary sector productivity has been under-estimated in the national accounts literature, with the implication that technological change in this sector was more important than suggested by Crafts and others. Finally, there is no data yet for female employment. It might show that the secondary sector's overall share of total employment peaked around 1750 before the mechanisation of spinning. A lively question and answer session followed which focused on possible bias due to the use of fathers rather than all males as the source of data. Dr Shaw-Taylor held that, as fathers tend to be in the 25 to 45 years age group and settled in employment, this would not be a problem.

Dr Amy Erickson, also of CAMPOP, spoke on the subject of 'Identifying female occupations in the early modern period', outlining the difficulties in researching this topic. She began by saying that there is a false assumption that women who were not ascribed an employment were not gainfully employed. Parish registers do not ascribe occupations to women but London Court Records tell a different story. These show that 54 per cent of females supported themselves entirely and 18 per cent partially by their labour, and between 60 per cent and 90 per cent of married women were in paid employment. Household head and population listings both show similar proportions. From an examination of census data for Bocking in Essex, it is clear that differences in the proportion of married women and women in employment between censuses are due to varying interpretations by enumerators in subsequent years. A further complication is that there was no way of distinguishing marital status, except 'widow', before 1801, while the term 'spinster' can refer to occupation or a single woman. Female occupations are often hidden, perhaps in low-level jobs that are not designated in population lists. An added complication is that when a husband is ascribed dual occupations the second job is often that of the wife as he 'owns' her labour. Dr Erickson described the case of a female clockmaker, Eleanor Mosely, who also took female apprentices: out of 25 references in the records, two referred to her marital status and two to her occupation. She has also found that milliners, often women in prosperous families, are not always recorded in the census—a matter of respectability, perhaps. Dr Erickson also suggested that the type and size of female-owned businesses indicated the restrictions placed on women. The following discussion raised many interesting issues around identifying female economic

contributions as a wife and mother. This meant that paid work was often casual, transient and, when in the context where the family is employed as a unit, not measurable. When questioned, Dr Erickson acknowledged that Exchequer Court records give little direct evidence of female occupations and that the process of teasing out data is labour intensive. Dr Erickson mentioned that consistent records, such as household listings, estate and institutional accounts, were good sources and she had visited county record offices for information from overseers' accounts.

Professor Colin Pooley, of the University of Lancaster and Chairman of LPSS, next gave a paper entitled 'Occupational influences on migration: evidence from Britain and Sweden'. It identified an over-emphasis on paid work as the driver of migration in many studies because occupational data was more likely to be available. He also suggested that there is a complex interaction between migration and mobility, which he visualised as a continuum. Factors that influence the decision to migrate relate to life course, dependency, the labour market, transport and personality. Reasons to make a life change include improving prospects via education or a better job, leaving home and seeking to be independent or, conversely, a dependant within a family unit. Professor Pooley recognised that information and personal networks are important, few people move without knowing, at the least, a job may be available in a new area. During the question and answer session, it was recognised that this factor increased in importance after 1750.

Professor Pooley described the Swedish data as encompassing all in and out migration to two areas, although moves within these areas are not recorded, while the British data are a sample for the whole country compiled by family historians. Given the geographic and economic differences between the two countries migration patterns are surprisingly similar in terms of age, marital status and gender. Agricultural workers make shorter moves than other groups, high status individuals tend to move furthest, although this is more marked in Sweden. Some of the differences might be due to the sources, as only the Swedish record is continuous and it had not been possible to study international movements.

Professor Pooley illustrated migration as a human event with two case studies. First, that of Thomas L., born in Rothwell, N. E. Lincolnshire 1826, whose father was a farm labourer. At the age of 13 he left home and worked for 10 years in a different location. He was hired annually at Caister autumn fair. In 1850, he gained work as a foreman overseeing 17 labourers and, in 1851, he married. He moved five times more over the next 27 years and, by 1867, was a farm bailiff. All his moves were in the same area of Lincolnshire and all his accommodation was provided by his employer. The second case study focused upon an independent female, born in Lancaster, who first moved at the age of four when her father died. Her mother set up school in Upholland, where they were both working when her mother died. As she was then 21, she was able to take up the running of the school until, at the age of 32, she decided she would like a change. After spending time in Kirby and Liverpool, living off her savings, she was taken on as a governess in a private house in

Windermere. Some searching questions brought a defence of the evidence compiled by family historians as a source. Not only had their data been subjected to a rigorous vetting process by the researcher, but the speaker was also convinced of the vested interest of family historians in getting their facts right.

Dr Emma Griffin, University of East Anglia spoke next on 'Work and the labouring poor during the Industrial Revolution: evidence from autobiographies'. Most of the sources for her work came from people born between 1750 and 1850, although some are earlier, and most of them came from industrial workers. Dr Griffin outlined the current academic view of the experience of the poor during the Industrial Revolution which is, in a word, pessimistic. The general view is that wages were low and working hours had increased with the loss of traditional holidays, while the intensity and discipline of work had also increased. This view is not borne out by the autobiographies. The writers showed a very different perception of themselves as prizing independence and loathing submission; it is usual to link a shortage of work to conformity but Dr Griffin presented examples which contradicted this assumption. A youngster rejected an apprenticeship in Manchester, five miles from home, even though his family and neighbours were appalled by such irresponsible behaviour. However, he then moved to London where he found employment, and eventually went to sea. Other case studies emphasise the role of London as a magnet for those wishing to advance themselves. Dr Griffin's argument was that more opportunities led to more self-confidence and hence gave a stronger incentive to move to gain autonomy. The growth of towns and loosening of the rules governing apprenticeship meant it was easier to gain skills. She gave several examples of men successfully working at a craft in which they had served only a short, or no, apprenticeship to learn. Agricultural labourers also raised their expectations as improved transport allowed a wider access to work. Questioners showed an appreciation of the likely bias in both the type of person who wrote an autobiography and of how they presented themselves. The speaker assured the audience that this presented a challenge rather than an obstacle.

Dr Patrick Wallis, of the London School of Economics, presented a paper entitled 'Apprenticeship in early modern London and Bristol' and said that this research intended to answer the question 'was apprenticeship an agent of mobility or did it reinforce existing inequalities?' Dr Wallis first looked at the persistence of apprenticeship in London and Bristol in 1690. He found high levels of departure, 20 per cent in the first year and 50 per cent by year four, so that the actual term served was usually three to five years rather than seven. This varied with occupation and absences fitted in with opportunity: for example, apprentices in trades relating to the sea had higher levels of absence than those tied to the port. He also recognised a marked increase in attendance on the master in the sixth and seventh year as indicating a regularisation of the situation in terms of the provisions of the indenture. London data was used to look at a series of linkages: parental and company wealth; wealth of company and later wealth of the apprentice; wealth of apprentice's father and general population; former apprentice's wealth and general population and

apprentice and company by wealth. For the period 1650–1690, it was found that apprentices' fathers and former apprentices were wealthier than their peers and that apprentices from wealthier families went to wealthier companies. Therefore, the operation of wealth was to influence access to the wealthier companies, and it was shown that the company had a stronger influence on future wealth than parental wealth on entry to the company. Hence by providing access to training, which was the basis of future wealth, apprenticeship did perpetuate privilege. However, Dr Wallis also noted that wealth had a limited effect on downward drift. The subsequent discussion highlighted the problems of using the Hearth Tax as a proxy for wealth and the difficulty of allowing for changes in the relative status of different trades.

Dr Paul Atkinson, University of Leeds, completed the day with his paper entitled 'How did occupation affect fertility in late nineteenth-century England?', which used evidence from woollen mills, tailoring and ironworks. He examined the experience of three contrasting towns between 1860 and 1911. Bradford had wool mills with high rates of female employment and depressed male wages. In Leeds, tailoring initially employed fewer women than Bradford but later in the period mechanisation and centralisation of the industry increased the demand for female labour. Middlesborough depended on heavy industry, mainly steel, leading to low levels of female employment based on lower status jobs such as sweatshops. Dr Atkinson framed his explanation of the relationship between female employment and birth rates by using the concept of 'perceived relative cost of child rearing', a cost which is not purely economic and assumes some control over fertility. He outlined the tension between higher expectations exerting a pressure to go to work to obtain consumer goods but a pull to stay at home to maintain these goods. Solutions to this dilemma include working more, reducing the amount of housework or reducing family size. Dr Atkinson found that household income over a particular threshold diminished the pressure to increase paid work and decreasing housework might be culturally unacceptable. However, he suggested that limiting family size was not acceptable in communities like Middlesborough. Here there was virtually no overlap between male and female spheres of interest and female labour was frowned upon, although the extent of female employment might be under-counted. In the other towns, there was little change in the structure of the female labour force but a dramatic decline in birth rates, particularly in Bradford which experienced steady rates of female employment. In Leeds centralisation led to more women at work but there were still a drop in the birth rate, showing that there is a negative correlation between female labour force participation and fertility. Dr Atkinson ended by pointing to the benefit of adding a cultural dimension to demography. Questions centred round the problem of measuring fertility when there is a high level of in-migration, the effect of infant mortality and whether occupational patterns or different cultures had the most influence on female labour force participation.

The conference was brought to a close with a round of applause for the excellent speakers. Special appreciation was also shown to Rowena Burgess who had organised such an

enjoyable event. There was an opportunity to share views on the conference and to meet and discuss over final refreshments before the delegates left. The conference was supported by the Economic History Society, LPSS and the University of East Anglia.

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