The General and the Particular

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Abstract

In historical investigation there tends to be tension between the general and the particular. It is sometimes convenient and appropriate, to present information in terms of national units when describing and analysing major change; yet much of critical importance to appreciating the nature of the change taking place is concealed if the discussion focuses exclusively on the whole country. This reflection illustrates the enlightenment gained by considering regional and local variation using the example of internal migration, and particularly the movement from the countryside into towns and cities.

In historical investigation there tends to be tension between the general and the particular. Take, for example, the study of the industrial revolution. The industrial revolution transformed the productive capacity of societies. It took place initially in England between the mid sixteenth and mid nineteenth centuries. When Elizabeth succeeded to the throne England was not only on the periphery of Europe geographically, it was also widely outranked by several continental countries in the range and sophistication of its industries. Three hundred years later when the Great Exhibition was staged in 1851 the country was economically pre-eminent, and had been transformed in many other aspects of social and economic life. For example, in early Tudor times England was one of the least urbanised countries in Europe; by 1851 it had become the first country in which more than half of the population lived in towns and cities. London was not among the ten largest European cities in 1500; in 1800 with a population of 865,000 it was the largest city by a wide margin. It is both simplest, and for some purposes appropriate, to present information in terms of national units when describing and analysing major change; yet much of critical importance to appreciating the nature of the change taking place is concealed if the discussion focuses exclusively on the whole country.

The unusual character of the 1831 census provides an illustration of what is gained by considering regional diversity. Rickman instructed the local enumerators to place in a category entitled 'retail trade and handicraft' all men who were engaged in making or supplying goods and services for a local market, while those who were selling to a national or international market were to be placed in 'manufacturing'. He sent to each enumerator a list of the 100 most commonly occurring occupations which were to be placed in the first category.[1] The composition of the list makes it clear, for example, that almost all those

1 Census of Great Britain 1831, *Enumeration Abstract, vol. I*, BPP 1833 XXXVI [C. 149], p. x.

employed in cotton, wool, silk, or other types of textile manufacture were to be placed in the second category. Metal manufacture was treated similarly. All the industries which figure most prominently in discussions of the industrial revolution are therefore to be found under the 'manufacturing' heading. In England in 1831 there were 2,985,000 men aged 20 years and above in the labour force: of these only 311,000, or 10.4 per cent, were in manufacturing; and of these in turn 70 per cent (218,000) were living in a contiguous block of five counties in the Midlands and northern England (Cheshire, Lancashire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Yorkshire West Riding). The manufacturing labour force was greatly outnumbered by those in retail trade and handicraft (958,000). Indeed, four of the largest local handicrafts—shoemakers, carpenters, tailors, and blacksmiths—were almost as numerous as the whole of the manufacturing workforce, providing employment for 297,000 men. Employment in retail trade and handicraft, in contrast to employment in manufacture, was evenly distributed across the counties, as was to be expected, given that all occupations in this category were selling their products in the local market.

The enlightenment gained by considering the range of county variation in conjunction with the national pattern is paralleled at each step down the space hierarchy. Hundredal variation within a county and parish variation with a hundred can prove as valuable in understanding economic and social structure and change in the past as when reviewing county characteristics within an overall national picture. For example, estimates of the national mortality level and its characteristics take on a new meaning if there are comparable data for smaller units. The scale of the difference between mortality in parishes in upland chalk country and parishes on Romney Marsh, or between parishes on main roads and those, like Hartland in Devon, without through traffic, provide insights which national data cannot provide.[2] And the hierarchy can be extended still further, for example down to the occupational group or the family. The articles published in *Local Population Studies* (*LPS*) over the past half century reflect the wealth of opportunities at each level in the hierarchy, and the fact that this is true of economic and social history no less than of demographic history.

Since the early days of *LPS* the opportunities for work on many aspects of local history have been greatly changed and the workload involved in making use of historical documents much lightened by the computer and the internet. For example, the provision of electronic access to census data can radically reduce the time needed to trace population change over time. This is true of access to an increasingly wide range of sources which would once have involved very many hours of pencil and paper work. It is also true of sources to which in the past there was little or no access. A particularly striking example of this is the transcription into an electronic form of the original information about every individual present on census night contained in the enumerators' returns for all the censuses from 1841 to 1911.[3] There has been a steady increase in the proportion of visits

2 M.J. Dobson, *Contours of Death and Disease in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1997).

3 The Integrated Census Microdata project (I-CeM). For further details see https://www1.essex.ac.uk/history/research/icem/.

to national and county record offices being made via the web rather than on foot. And other electronic facilities are now available which advance both the analysis and presentation of data. For example, patterns which may be hard to detect when presented in tabular form often become readily visible when presented on maps generated by Geographical Information Systems.

The articles published in *LPS* over the last half-century have contributed greatly to our understanding of many aspects of the transformation of this country between the reigns of Elizabeth and Victoria. I should like to make some comments on one aspect of this transformation, both in relation to what is known and to what will require additional work to resolve existing uncertainties. The topic is internal migration and particularly the movement from the countryside into towns and cities.

It was once widely supposed that when most people lived in rural areas and agriculture provided far more employment than any other occupation, and when movement over land was slow, relatively expensive, and occasionally hazardous, a high proportion of each rising generation would remain in their parish of birth throughout their lives. Half a century ago Peter Laslett, as part of his work demonstrating the dominance of the nuclear family household and the virtual absence of extended families in early modern England, made use of the listings of inhabitants in the villages of Clayworth in Nottinghamshire and Cogenhoe in Northamptonshire to examine population turnover in the seventeenth century.[4] For Clayworth there were two detailed and informative listings in 1676 and 1688; for Cogenhoe six listings between 1618 and 1628. The existence of successive listings made it possible to measure both the number of individuals who were included in the earlier listing but who had disappeared a decade later, and also those who appeared in the later listing but who were not present in the earlier one; and it was possible to account in some detail for the reasons for disappearances and new appearances. Laslett calculated that, after discounting appearances and disappearances which were due to birth and death, in both parishes about two-fifths of the people who were present at the time of the earlier listing had left the parish a decade later, and, similarly that about two-fifths of those present at the later date had migrated into the parish in the interval between the first and second listing.[5]

Laslett remarked of the Clayworth listings that 'nothing previously known about settled, rural, traditional populations prepares us for the turnover figure which can be worked out by comparing the names of those present in 1676 with the names of those present in 1688'.[6] As with his finding about the dominance of the nuclear family household, he was demonstrating the inaccuracy of assumptions which had once been widely held. Half a century later both these findings have become so much a part of our understanding of life in early modern England that it may now be difficult to understand their initial impact.

In general the pattern of migratory movement in the past in England conforms to expectation. Some characteristics are, so to speak, obvious. In relation to migration to

4 P. Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 50–101.
5 Laslett, *Family Life*, p. 68.
6 Laslett, *Family Life*, p. 65.

towns, for example, it is no surprise that the average distance moved by migrants to small towns was less than to larger towns, and that as distance to an urban destination increased the scale of migration to it declined. Exceptions to rules of this sort therefore hold a special interest. For example, it is intriguing that the London register of freemen who became citizens by means of apprenticeship in the mid sixteenth century provides evidence about the county of origin of each individual. Of 1,054 men who became freemen in this manner in 1551–1553, 259 came from northern counties (Cumberland, Durham, Lancashire, Northumberland, Westmorland, and Yorkshire) and 141 from western counties (Cheshire, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, and Worcestershire). In 1600, the first date for which there are estimates of county population totals, the northern group of counties had a population of 823,811 and the western group a total of 461,784 when the population of England was 4,161,784.[7] The northern counties therefore accounted for 19.8 per cent of the national population and the western counties for 11.1 per cent, a combined total of 30.9 per cent, whereas their shares of apprenticeships were 24.6 and 13.4 per cent respectively, a combined total of 38.0 per cent.[8] In each case the county group supplied a larger percentage of men admitted as citizens by means of apprenticeship than their percentage share of the national population, even though the men in question had to travel considerably further on average than those who came from East Anglia, the Midlands, and the South-East. London apprentices were not, of course, typical of migrants to London generally but the omnipresence of London as an influence on the lives of people throughout the country is evident in other ways. Richard Gough's remarkable, detailed account of the lives of the inhabitants of the village of Myddle in Shropshire in the later seventeenth century illustrates the point. Myddle was a few miles from Shrewsbury. In Hey's introduction to Gough's publications, he notes that Myddle was about 160 miles distant from London, but that Gough's account of the people who lived there, 'Observations concerning the Seates in Myddle and the familyes to which they belong', leaves no doubt that:

> … it was not cut off from the mainstream of national life as might be supposed. … He frequently mentions London in passing as if it were commonplace that his neighbours should have been there. Men and women from all sections of his community went to the capital in search of fortune or excitement or to escape from trouble at home. Most of them kept in touch with their families, and further information about events in London and other parts of the country filtered back to Myddle through the 'Gazet' and 'our News letters'.[9]

Migration from the countryside to the town in England in the early modern period took place on a scale without parallel in continental Europe, other than the Netherlands. It was

7 E.A. Wrigley, *The Early English Censuses* (Oxford, 2011), Table A2.6, pp. 224–5.

8 S. Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge, 1989), Table 3.4, p. 78. Since Monmouth was treated as a Welsh county in *The Early English Censuses*, I have excluded it from the counties in Rappaport's table: it provided only one citizen to the total in his table.

9 R. Gough, *The History of Myddle*, edited by D. Hey (London, 1983), p. 18.

closely linked to the exceptionally rapid rate of urban growth in England. Over the three centuries from 1550 to 1850 the populations of France, Germany, Italy, and Spain all roughly doubled; the English population grew five-fold over the same period.[10] Remarkably, however, the disparity in growth rates was almost exclusively due to the exceptional rapidity of urban growth in England and Wales. Non-urban populations on the continent and in England and Wales grew at broadly similar rates. Between 1600 and 1800 the European total rose by 49 per cent; the total for England and Wales rose by 70 per cent. The comparable increases in urban population were 61 and 574 per cent. The urban totals relate to all towns with 5,000 or more inhabitants.[11] In the early sixteenth century England had been one of the least urbanised European countries; at the beginning of the nineteenth century only in the Netherlands was the urban percentage higher than in England and Wales.

The experience of leaving the countryside to live in a town was therefore exceptionally common in England compared to other countries. Some illustrative calculations provide insight into the scale of the movements involved. They involve wide margins of error and are intended only to suggest the order of magnitude of the phenomenon in the mid-eighteenth century. Over the eighteenth century the urban population increased by approximately 1.5 million, or roughly 15,000 per annum, which is assumed to be the level of increase in the middle of the century. This figure relates to towns with 5,000 or more inhabitants and is therefore conservative, since there were many smaller towns. Urban death rates in the first half of the century substantially exceeded birth rates, though the difference was greatly reduced in the later decades of the century and had probably disappeared by the end of the century. Assuming that the death rate was on average 5 per 1,000 higher than the birth rate and an urban population of 1.6 million, this would increase the net level of in-migration needed to make possible the increase which occurred to 23,000 persons per annum. The gross figure was, however, substantially higher since there was a flow of people in both directions. What Gough observed about the movements of Myddle's inhabitants to and from London held true generally. Many of those who moved from the countryside to towns later returned having acquired new skills or because of family ties. The annual overall total of movement from country to town each year is unlikely to have been less than 35,000 and may well have been much higher. The non-urban population of England at the mid-point of the eighteenth century was approximately 4.3 million. The bulk of those moving from country to town were in their teens or early twenties. In the mid-eighteenth century they would have constituted roughly a fifth of the total population. This suggests that not less than 4 per cent and quite probably a substantially higher proportion of the age group moved from rural areas to towns each

10 E.A. Wrigley, 'Reconsidering the industrial revolution', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 49 (2018), Table 1, p. 11.

11 Wrigley, 'Reconsidering', Table 2, p. 15. In the table Europe consists of all the countries listed in J. de Vries, *European Urbanization 1500–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), Table 3.6, pp. 36-7 apart from England and Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and the Netherlands. The Netherlands was excluded because in the seventeenth century the country experienced rapid urban growth, anticipating England's later urban expansion.

year. There was, of course, a much higher proportion of total migration from the village annually since migration from village of birth to neighbouring rural parishes was also very common.

One element in the migratory flow whose size is particularly difficult to measure may have played a critical part in fostering change in the country generally. I refer to the reverse flow back into rural England of a proportion of those who had started in the countryside and later returned to it. My reason for suggesting that this reverse flow may have been of great importance in relation to the changes taking place in the English economy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is indirectly captured in one of Adam Smith's best known aphorisms, 'Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production'.[12] Recent research has demonstrated that there was a major rise in the percentage of the labour force engaged in the secondary sector during the seventeenth century and thereafter relatively little further increase in this percentage; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was the tertiary sector whose share of the labour force rose steadily.[13] The income elasticity of demand for secondary and tertiary products and services is higher than that for primary products. Satisfying food needs is always the first call on incomes and when this need has been satisfied, the demand for 'comforts' and 'luxuries' may rise. The scale of any such change will be greatly influenced by the prevailing mind set; upon the difference between 'satisficers' and 'optimisers'. Goldsmith captured the mind set of the satisficer when he wrote in his poem 'The deserted village':

> A time there was, ere England's griefs began,
> When every rood of ground maintained its man;
> For him light labour spread her wholesome store,
> Just gave what life required, but gave no more:
> His blest companions, innocence and health;
> And his best riches, ignorance of wealth.

At times this mind set was common. In the wake of the Black Death, for example, labour was scarce and wages rose. Many wage earners, however, used their increased purchasing power to take greater leisure rather than buy a wider range of goods and services. The major increase in the proportion of the labour force in the secondary sector suggests that by the seventeenth century the English had become a nation of 'optimisers' willing to work longer to secure greater purchasing power. For example, the recent re-examination of trends in annual real wages by Humphries and Weisdorf concluded that there was a steady

12 A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, edited by E. Cannan, 5th edn, Vol. 2 (London, 1961), p. 179.

13 Recent research by Sebastian Keibek shows that male employment percentages in the secondary sector in England and Wales in 1601, 1701, 1801, and 1851 were 28.8, 42.8, 42.8, and 45.6; the tertiary sector percentages were 7.5, 11.8, 15.8, and 22.8 at the same dates. S. Keibek, 'The male occupational structure of England and Wales, 1600-1850' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2016), Table 18, p. 152, and Appendix B.

and continuous rise in this measure from *c.* 1600 onwards and that this was associated with a steady rise in the number of hours worked.[14] De Vries, in describing the character of the 'industrious revolution' which transformed individual values and behaviour, quoted David Hume: 'it is a violent method and most cases impracticable, to oblige the labourer to toil in order to raise from the land more than what subsists himself and his family. Furnish him with manufactures and commodities and he will do it himself'.[15]

For those who were living in towns and were almost entirely employed either in the secondary and tertiary sectors it is no surprise that, having satisfied their need for food and fuel, they were quick to purchase other products. For those living in the countryside the outcome may initially have been less certain. If the world whose passing Goldsmith regretted so bitterly had continued; if a 'peasant mentality' had prevailed, the demand for secondary and tertiary products on the part of country dwellers, who continued to comprise the majority of the population, might have flagged. Traditional attitudes appear to have lingered in some communities. For example, Hoskins' description of Wigston Magna, a village a few miles from Leicester suggests that 'peasant' values and life-style, with which he sympathised, continued to characterise much of the community even in the early eighteenth century. He claimed that Wigston 'was still fundamentally a community of small peasants living in a familiar, almost timeless, world in which there was plenty of hard work and yet plenty of leisure, and in which a man could still have dignity and self-respect'.[16] That this was not the case generally in England, however, seems clear. Gough's account of Myddle, which was describing the village in the later seventeenth century, suggests a different conclusion. The advent of change is symbolised in the growing ubiquity of village shops, often stocking a wide range of goods.

The exceptionally rapid growth of the urban sector and the resulting high volume of migration from country to town facilitated similarity between demand behaviour in the town and in the countryside. There were strong return flows of men and women from towns to rural areas. They had grown accustomed to purchasing a much wider range of commodities and services than were readily available in the rural areas, and their presence and example encouraged those who had remained in the country to do likewise, and to make this possible by increasing work time and reducing leisure hours. In this connection the exceptional size and consequent influence of London was important. Moving to a large city affected purchasing desires and behaviour more powerfully than moving to a small town.

A further point may be made in conclusion. The scale of possible urban growth in organic economies was strongly influenced by the level of agricultural productivity. In a discussion of the constraints on urban growth arising from the level of crop yields, Bairoch, approaching the question in a manner reminiscent of von Thünen, concluded that

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14 J. Humphries and J. Weisdorf, 'Unreal wages? A new empirical foundation for the study of living standards and economic growth in England, 1260–1860', University of Oxford, Discussion Papers in Economic History, 147 (Oxford, 2016).

15 J. de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 66–7.

16 W.G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant* (London, 1957), p. 246.

where, as in continental Europe *c.* 1800, the average yield of wheat was 8 quintals per hectare (about 12 bushels per acre), 'the maximum proportion of the population that could live in towns (with a criterion of 5,000 inhabitants for a town) was of the order of between 13 and 15 per cent'.[17] Average cereal yields on the continent *c.* 1800 were similar to the level two centuries earlier and the proportion of the population living in towns with 5,000 or more inhabitants remained at around 11–12 per cent throughout this period.[18] Cereal yields in England in the sixteenth century were similar to those on the continent but net grain yields more than doubled during next two centuries and the proportion of arable land fallowed each year fell substantially.[19] Since the number of men working on the land rose only slightly between *c.* 1600 and *c.* 1800, manpower productivity doubled.[20] Agricultural improvement was a *sine qua non* of urban growth in organic economies. England remained broadly self-sufficient in temperate foodstuffs throughout this period. The positive feedback between agricultural improvement and urban growth was closely associated in turn with the changing occupational structure of the country.

While it is plausible to suppose that the return to the countryside of a proportion of the men and women who had earlier moved to towns played an important role in alerting country dwellers to the attractions of the goods and services available in the cities, and it may prove possible to estimate the approximate scale of this return flow, finding direct evidence of its effect presents problems. The diaries and reminiscences of return migrants may contain illuminating material. Also, where the identity of a return migrant is known, if he or she marries after returning to the countryside and the partner can be shown only to have lived in a rural setting, this is likely to have been influential in determining the subsequent expenditure pattern of the couple. Any evidence for different rural areas concerning the level of migration to towns and therefore also, indirectly, of the scale of return migration might prove revealing. It is likely that it would influence the rapidity of change in the pattern of consumption patterns. If de Vries' industrious revolution can be shown to have been as evident in rural areas as in towns, this would provide strong support for the view that the major rise in the proportion of total consumer expenditure spent on secondary and tertiary products in the seventeenth century which induced parallel change in the occupational structure, reflected changing consumer behaviour countrywide.

17 P. Bairoch, 'The impact of crop yields, agricultural productivity, and transport costs on urban growth between 1800 and 1910', in A. van der Woude, A. Hayami, and J. de Vries (eds), *Urbanization in History: a Process of Dynamic Interaction* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 134–51. Here at p. 146.

18 Wrigley, 'Reconsidering', Table 2, p. 15.

19 E.A. Wrigley, *Energy and the English Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2010), Table 3.5, p. 81.

20 Keibek's recent estimates show that agriculture employed 62.9 per cent of the male labour force in 1601 and 38.2 per cent in 1801: see Keibek, 'Male occupational structure', Table 18, p. 152, and Appendix B. The population rose by 108 per cent over the two centuries. After allowing for the change in the age structure of the population between the two dates, this suggests that the agricultural labour force increased by 19 per cent over the two centuries, E.A. Wrigley, R.S. Davies, J.E. Oeppen, and R.S. Schofield, *England's Population History from Family Reconstitution 1580–1837* (Cambridge, 1997), Table A9.1, pp. 614–5.