
Taking Forward Roger's Interest in the Relationship between the Early Modern Family, Demography, Economy and Government Policy*

Simon Szreter¹

Abstract

*This paper describes how Roger Schofield came to characterise the English social system of the early modern period as 'individualist-collectivist', in which individualism is located within a larger structure and context of collectivism. It discusses this in the context of his contributions to the book he co-edited with John Walter in 1989, entitled *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern Society*. Roger's work related the evidence of demographic and epidemiological change not only to family structures, ideological belief systems and government policy, as saliently represented by effects of the poor laws, but also to economic productivity as a dependent variable. That was quite the opposite of the dominant orthodoxy of the post-war era, which was that demography and epidemiology were driven by economics, not vice versa. This has the implication for our own era that constructive government policy has repeatedly played an important positive role in the economic productivity of the nation and that tax-funded generous support for the poor is a central part of that, which citizens should positively support.*

Roger and I share in common that we were both enticed into the field of demographic history first by Peter Laslett and then by Tony Wrigley, at least according to Roger's recollection in his 'Through a glass darkly' memoir.² But Roger, of course, heard the siren call in 1965–1966, whereas I only became first aware of this exciting new field in 1974–1976, first through reading *The World We Have Lost* as a sixth-former and then encountering repeated respectful references to the article on Colyton by a certain E.A. Wrigley in my first term at Cambridge when studying the industrial revolution.

I have called this paper 'Taking forward Roger's interest in the relationship between the early modern family, demography, economy and government policy' because I think this was an interest prematurely cut short by his stroke in 1988.

As Richard Smith's paper for this conference reminds us, a 1963 doctoral study of government policy, in the form of taxation during the Tudors, was in fact Roger's intellectual first love, almost an inevitability for a super-bright young history student entering Clare College in the late 1950s and therefore entering into the orbit of that great historiographic sun, Sir Geoffrey Elton. And it was also the subject he returned to after all his

* <https://doi.org/10.35488/lps105.2020.31>.

1 Simon Szreter: srss@cam.ac.uk.

2 R. Schofield, '“Through a glass darkly”' *Social Science History*, 22 (1998), pp. 117–30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/11711532>.

wonderful work in demographic history, finally publishing that PhD to his great personal satisfaction as *Taxation Under the Early Tudors 1485–1547* in 2004.³

As I think many of you know, one of my most recent published works is an intervention into the world of contemporary public policy. This is the essay co-authored with Hilary Cooper and Ben Szreter, titled ‘Incentivising an ethical economics’, which shared the inaugural Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) Economics prize in the summer of 2019.⁴ Those unfamiliar with the essay will find that, although it was entered for an Economics Prize, the case that it builds for radical new policies today is entirely based on a reading of the early modern and modern economic and demographic history of England and Wales. So this is not taking Roger’s work forward quite in the usual sense that a group of academic historians would understand that to mean, as constituting further empirical research evaluating and refining the findings and hypotheses that Roger’s work has bequeathed to us. There is plenty of scope for that, of course, and much of the research I have completed throughout my career during the last four decades can be seen as doing precisely that in relation not only to Roger’s work, but also Tony’s, Peter’s and that of the two Richards; Smith and Wall. After all, they were the extraordinary teaching team I was fortunate to have when I opted to take the History of Population paper in Part II of the History Tripos in 1978–1979.

With the IPPR essay, however, I am taking forward Roger’s work (and indeed that of Richard Smith and Tony Wrigley) in another sense, by taking it out of the purely academic arena and placing it squarely into the public policy arena. The particular pieces of Roger’s work that I see myself drawing on most strongly in the IPPR essay are his two contributions to the book he co-edited with John Walter, entitled *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern Society*, which was published in 1989 as volume 10 of the Cambridge University Press series of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure.⁵

There is of course a precedent (and there may be several others that I do not know about) for the research work of the Cambridge Group entering the public policy arena. It is not an entirely happy one. I know that both Roger and Richard Smith were not best pleased when Ferdinand Mount published *The Subversive Family* in 1982.⁶ The impeccably Eton and Christchurch baronet was at the time Head of Margaret Thatcher’s No. 10 Policy

3 R. Schofield, *Taxation Under the Early Tudors, 1485–1547* (Malden, MA and Oxford, 2004).

4 S. Szreter, H. Cooper and B. Szreter, ‘Incentivising an ethical economics: a radical plan to force a step change in the quality and quantity of the UK’s economic growth’, <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/incentivising-an-ethical-economics> [accessed 11 November 2020].

5 J. Walter and R. Schofield, ‘Famine, disease and crisis mortality in early modern society’ in J. Walter and R. Schofield (eds) *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern Society* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 1–74, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511599637>; R. Schofield, ‘Family structure, demographic behaviour and economic growth’, in Walter and Schofield, *Famine, Disease and the Social Order*, pp. 279–304. On-line access to this edited volume is available at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/famine-disease-and-the-social-order-in-early-modern-society/9A6463F05E645897505A7DAF6570965E> [accessed 11 November 2020].

6 F. Mount, *The Subversive Family: an Alternative History of Love and Marriage* (New York, 1982).

Unit and about to write her 1983 election manifesto. Into his pro-Thatcherite grab-bag, Mount had stuffed Alan Macfarlane's 1978 *Origins of English Individualism*.⁷ This had taken the early findings of Peter Laslett and the Cambridge Group and, combining this with his own anthropological perspective on the importance of Richard Smith's findings on England's unusual legal history of property rights, had somewhat overemphasised the Group's revolutionary discovery that a society composed mainly of nuclear family households and mobile individuals pre-dated the industrial revolution in England. This was then retailed, in effect at third hand, by Ferdinand Mount into a story of England as the land of eternal individualism, destined to teach this glorious model of family life and individualist enterprise to the rest of the planet. Like Martin Wiener's equally partial and misleading *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980*, published in 1981, this was history which suited the incumbent Prime Minister's view of the world and her political agenda down to the ground.⁸

Infamously, and no doubt encouraged by Mount's reading of English history, Thatcher confidently went on, after her third general election victory in June 1987, to pronounce in an interview to *Woman's Own* magazine, published with a great sense of timing on Halloween, 31 October 1987, that 'There is no such thing as society. ... There are individual men and women, and there are families'.⁹ Perhaps the appearance of this interview was the 'up with this I will not put' moment for Roger!

More likely, it was simply the progress of his own continuing academic and intellectual reflection on the research findings that he and so many others—many contributing to this commemorative collection—were producing in the course of the 1980s, following the appearance in 1981 of the Group's *magnum opus* number one, *The Population History of England 1541–1871*.¹⁰ Indeed, in his 1989 essay, 'Family structure, demographic behaviour and economic growth', Roger commences with a note acknowledging that he has been stimulated in particular by the work of Richard Smith, Ron Lesthaeghe, Alan Macfarlane and Emmanuel Todd; and they were certainly all stimulated by his work, too.¹¹

In the 1989 essay, which formed the final chapter in Walter and Schofield's volume on *Famine, Disease and the Social Order*, Roger introduced what is to my mind an extremely fruitful line of thought. He started with a distinction between two ideal-types of pre-industrial regimes, each with their justifying ideologies, lying at opposite ends of a spectrum, one in which '[e]conomic activity is largely a family affair in which labour is applied to capital in the family's control' and which is associated with a relatively undifferentiated economy.¹²

7 A. MacFarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: the Family, Property and Social Transition* (Oxford, 1978)

8 M.J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit* (Cambridge, 1981; 2nd edn 2004).

9 For a transcript of the interview, see <https://www.margarethatcher.org/document/106689> [accessed 11 November 2020].

10 E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871: a Reconstruction* (London, 1981).

11 Schofield, 'Family structure, demographic behaviour, and economic growth'.

12 Schofield, 'Family structure, demographic behaviour, and economic growth', p. 285.

This he termed the ‘familistic’ regime. At the other end of the spectrum, in the context of a more differentiated but still pre-industrial (or, in Wrigley’s subsequent formulation ‘advanced organic’) economy, ‘a significant proportion of the population sells its labour to be applied to capital over which it has no control’.¹³ In the latter, by contrast with the former, ‘most children are expected to leave home, accumulate their own wealth, choose their own marriage partners’.¹⁴ This is the ‘individualism’ which Alan Macfarlane emphasised and which Ferdinand Mount over-emphasised. But, as Roger then went on to point out, there is much more to this regime than just individualism.

With so many of the young leaving home before marriage, three quarters of the population lived in different villages from those of their parents. With such mobility it therefore followed that, again by contrast with the former undifferentiated economy, ‘for support in old age and at difficult times, the significant relations [of all individuals in this society] are not with their family, but with the community’.¹⁵ Roger therefore coined in this 1989 essay the term ‘individualist-collectivist’ to more correctly characterise the nature of the overall English social system.¹⁶ Individualism, *tout court*, was an historical impossibility. Individualist behaviour, represented by the labour mobility of the younger generation, absolutely required collective community provision for the old and the sick to permit endemic labour mobility to occur; and to allow such a regime to function for several centuries. Nuclear family households and a younger generation expected not only to leave home, but to leave behind their home village. Therefore, their ageing parents needed this individualism, represented by the mobility of the young in search of gainful employment, to be located within a larger structure and context of collectivism.

Roger then went on to discuss the way in which such a labour-mobility-prone society could facilitate both agricultural productivity and urban growth. Finally, he concluded the article with the assistance of a classic Cambridge Group-style ‘join the dots’ graphic of gross reproduction rate iso-lines clearly showing how much rising and falling fertility was due either to proportions marrying (vertical movement) or age at marriage (horizontal movement).¹⁷ This showed that it was first decreases, and then rises, in the age at marriage which drove both the initial trend to a peak of fertility in the period 1750–1820 and then also a backtrack from that peak thereafter. Roger’s argument was that this implicated the role of the increasing generosity of the Old Poor Law in the era of Speenhamland, followed by attempts to constrain its expenditure after 1815 and then its absolute reduction after 1834.

Meanwhile, if we briefly return to the classic 73-page introduction to *Famine, Disease and the Social order in Early Modern Society* which Roger co-authored with John Walter, the principal focus there was on famines, dearth and social order.¹⁸ Here the two authors were

13 Schofield, ‘Family structure, demographic behaviour, and economic growth’, p. 285.

14 Schofield, ‘Family structure, demographic behaviour, and economic growth’, p. 285.

15 Schofield, ‘Family structure, demographic behaviour, and economic growth’, p. 291.

16 Schofield, ‘Family structure, demographic behaviour, and economic growth’, p. 285.

17 Schofield, ‘Family structure, demographic behaviour, and economic growth’, p. 297.

18 Walter and Schofield, ‘Famine, disease and crisis mortality’.

particularly impressed with the poor laws and the powers vested in England's magistracy 'to intervene in the normal processes of social and economic life on behalf of the community at large', citing Paul Slack's work as a particular influence.¹⁹

So, it seems to me that what we have here is a pivotal piece in Roger's intellectual trajectory. What Roger was doing in this chapter was both summarising very insightfully everything he had learned from 25 years of analysis of parish registers while also pointing forwards to a large agenda. This would relate the evidence of demographic and epidemiological change not only to family structures, ideological belief systems and government policy, as saliently represented by effects of the poor laws, but also to economic productivity as a dependent variable. That was quite the opposite of the dominant orthodoxy of the post-war era, which was that demography and epidemiology were driven by economics, not vice versa.

This heterodoxy of Roger's is precisely what our radical IPPR essay has argued for. It has presented an account which shows that throughout the last five centuries labour productivity in the British economy has been at its most impressive when a generous universal social security and welfare system has been in place, something which has happened twice, once in the period 1598–1834 and again between 1945 and 1979. On each occasion, when it was finally withdrawn, firstly due to the influence of classical liberal and, secondly due to neoliberal ideologies, each proclaiming the importance of free-market economics and the reduction of state spending particularly on the poor, the productivity of the nation soon deteriorated, firstly during 1873–1937 and then again in the entire period since 1979.

Further research both by early modern historians of England and Wales, and also of Scotland, Ireland and the continent of Europe has only continued to confirm that the Old Poor Laws of England and Wales were, indeed a formidably extensive system of virtually universal social security, welfare and even medical care and assistance. Secondly, the comprehensive coverage and level of expenditure, rising to 2 per cent of gross domestic product in cash transfers to the poor, was almost unique in early modern Europe. Rather than acting as a drag on the economy, as liberal economics views such government social expenditure, this was associated with England becoming the most productive economy in the world. The implication is that constructive government policy has repeatedly played an important positive role in the economic productivity of the nation and that tax-funded generous support for the poor is a central part of that, which citizens should positively support.

It is interesting that in the second volume of her autobiography Mrs Thatcher thought that she had completely exonerated herself of the charge that her individualist philosophy was toxically anti-social by saying,

19 Walter and Schofield, 'Famine, disease and crisis mortality', p. 68; P. Slack (1989) 'The response to plague in early modern England: public policies and their consequences', in Walter and Schofield, *Famine, Disease and the Social Order*, pp. 167–88.

they never quoted the rest. I went on to say: there are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then to look after our neighbour. My meaning, clear at the time but subsequently distorted beyond recognition, was that society was not an abstraction, separate from the men and women who composed it, but a living structure of individuals, families, neighbours and voluntary associations.²⁰

However, what remains entirely missing from Mrs Thatcher's self-defence, and that of her apologists, is the word 'government'. Individuals, families, neighbours and associations do not exist in a vacuum. The demographic and economic history, which Roger was analysing in his contributions to *Famine, Disease and the Social Order* in 1989, showed how vital and constructive government, in the form of the statutory poor laws, were for society in general, not just for the poor. This remarkable government policy is what enabled all these other aspects of society to flourish and to produce England's distinctive form of individualism, its 'individualist-collectivist' society.

20 This was pointed out on the Institute of Economic Affairs web site by G.R. Steele on 30 September 2009: see <https://iea.org.uk/blog/there-is-no-such-thing-as-society> [accessed 11 November 2020]. The original reference is M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London, 1993).