

THE FUTURE OF HISTORICAL DEMOGRAPHY

UPSIDE DOWN AND INSIDE OUT

The future of historical demography

Upside down and inside out

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Introduction

Without the threat of punishment, there is no joy in flight

Kobo Abe

The editors prickle you to join them in thinking upside down and inside out about historical demography, and introduce the background to this book project.

A soapbox

Most, if not all, academic settings ask scholars to think and talk rigorously, to demonstrate how their arguments correspond with existing theory, and provide evidence for their hypotheses. These conditions are the foundations of science. But the tight, well-designed framework within which we normally operate also comes at a cost. Frameworks direct us to think inside boxes, sometimes leaving little room for creativity and meta-reflection. With this book, we want to offer a platform – an opportunity for scholars to think outside the box, to let their peers know what they had always wanted to express but never found the occasion to do so. We set only two conditions: first, everyone’s reflections should not take more than a page or four, because we wanted to offer as many people as possible the time and space for a soapbox speech. Second, their reflections should somehow cast light on the past and especially the future of historical demography.

Reflections on past, present and future

Why reflections on the past *and* present *and* future? It was about time, we thought, to open the floor for an inspiring debate as to what the future of historical demography should look like. Of course, this debate would not amount to much without considering both the past and present. The field of historical demography studies human population characteristics and change in the past. It pays particular (but not exclusive) attention to the main components driving population changes: fertility, mortality, and migration.

Over the past four decades, historical demography has developed from a “young” discipline that used painstakingly collected new materials to uncover patterns and trends in marriage, fertility, migration, mortality and household formation, to an “adolescent” or even “adult” discipline adopting longitudinal approaches, and delving into heterogeneity, change, dynamics, and transitions. Throughout this process, historical demographers have tried to balance factors and actors, structure and culture, contexts and agents. Historical demography has undergone sweeping theoretical and methodological shifts. We have accomplished much. Among the particular strengths of the field we may count our ability to build bridges with other disciplines around topics that deserve attention because they form part of today’s societal challenges. Solid interpretations of qualitative and quantitative evidence about the past have produced insights on the drivers of population dynamics that reach beyond those the expertise of demographers can provide. Also, they yield insight and tools to inform predictions of future population and family dynamics.

But there are signs of some growing pains. In this volume, younger, older, female and male scholars from different geographic and research backgrounds offer their reflections on where the discipline of historical demography currently stands now, reproach us for what we have overlooked, indicate key trends in research we must investigate further, and stimulate us to link our future work to other disciplines. Their

contributions can, in our view, ultimately be centred around three key issues. These are briefly set out below, and we count on your curiosity to flip through the pages and read the 59 thought-provoking ideas about how to resolve these puzzles in the future.

Upside down: theories and methods

In many articles, theories and methods are mentioned in the same breath, or at least in a single sub-section. In historical demography, more and more publications rely on a 'scientific design' in which quantitative methods take pride of place. But does a significant statistical difference also make a historical difference that is both meaningful and insightful? Ultimately, we need theory to make sense of statistical results. While theory has traditionally been a weaker area in demography, history is full of it, and so are several adjacent disciplines (in particular, sociology) that shed further light on behaviour. Certainly, the perspectives that have become mainstream in historical demography over the past decades, such as the life-course concept of linked lives (culturally, structurally and genetically), offer potential for stronger theory-building. But to date this potential has barely been realized. Have we, as historical demographers, focused too much on developing or adopting ever more sophisticated methodologies, while losing sight of and interest in the rich theoretical and qualitative side of our historical material?

Inside out: from periphery to core?

During what some identify as the golden age of historical demography, scholars from several countries started to excavate the demographic past of populations by initiating data collection projects. The analysis of the resulting, unprecedented archival materials produced spectacular new findings that found their way into mainstream history and demography. In the decades that followed, historical demographers mostly dug deeper (although some expanded the geographic horizons of historical demographic research by looking into Asia). This process has been characterized by a certain path dependency: new research projects stood on the shoulders of the giants and built further upon what was already there. As a result we have primarily come to know in much greater detail the populations that were studied from the beginning, with ever more attention for heterogeneity, change over time, and so on. It is evident that digging deeper into the same holes has taught us much, and there is still more to learn. But at the same time, the community of historical demographers has paid very little attention to places and time periods outside of this already established range.

There are good reasons for this development. It is always more efficient to build upon what is already available, especially in a quantitative field where data collection is costly, both in terms of time and money. That money tends to be more easily accessible in Northern and Western Europe, Northern America and a few

other regions of the world. For periods further back than the 19th century, data quickly become ever more scarce, and the data reliability standards we tend to use as benchmarks become ever harder to meet.

But perhaps it is too easy to push aside all of demographic history outside of the narrow time and place of 19th century (Western) Europe and North America. Is it legitimate for us as *historical* demographers to do so on the grounds that all the rest of history is not really, and could never become, historical demography, given its lack of equally sophisticated and precise longitudinal sources? By implicitly viewing most of history as periphery, and sticking to a narrow definition of the core of historical demography, we lose a lot. Are the demographic fates of small farmers in Northern Europe really that important for world history? If the strength of the field of historical demography rests in the fact that we can offer important insights in areas where we have relative advantages – as a sub-discipline of history as well as demography – is it not our task and responsibility to also start digging further away, in Africa, in Latin America, Asia, the Pacific and other understudied regions? And also to dig deeper into history, into medieval and ancient times, to cover all of history? Should we not imagine a future in which we devote part of our talent for methodological sophistication to the development of new methodologies and techniques for studying areas with different kinds of data, in collaboration with adjacent disciplines?

How deeply should we foster links with other disciplines?

As several contributions to this volume point out, historical demography has perhaps spent too much time gazing at its own navel in recent years, and, at least from the perspective of demographers, has become less relevant. This observation invites self-reflection. One might counter-argue that the impression of a marginalization of historical demography ensues naturally from the maturation of the discipline: research findings that used to be presented at general demography conferences or published in demographic journals are now channelled into more specialized avenues. At the same time, we are losing opportunities to offer historical perspective on core current issues such as international migration and cultural dynamics, longevity and genetic components of health, sub-replacement fertility and social policy, predictions of future demographic developments, healthy ageing and public finances. How deeply, and with which disciplines, should ties best be fostered so that we can learn from the past to create a blossoming future?

The future of historical demography. Upside down and inside out invites you to reflect on these issues, and open new discussions that will lead towards an inspiring and intellectually challenging future.

Chapter I

The whole of history

*The charm of history and its enigmatic lesson consists in the fact that, from age to age,
nothing changes and yet everything is completely different*

Aldous Huxley

Four pleas illuminating why, as historical demographers, we should investigate demographic patterns in periods outside of the ‘canon-period’ of 1850-1940.

Dare to dig! More history is needed to take historical demography a few steps further...

Tine De Moor

Demography is essential for historians to understand the dynamics of, the change in, and the evolution of many different aspects of society over time. If you have no idea about a population's evolution, about population pressure, about migration, etc., there is no point in even trying to understand economic growth, political turmoil, the spread of culture, and many more interesting historical phenomena. Nobody would dare to deny this, although many historians may not immediately put this implicit knowledge into practice either! Yet even with this knowledge at the back of our minds there is still a problem: most historical demographers keep silent on even the most basic demographic data about any period preceding the 1800s. Before 1800 seems to be 'a faraway land', where demographers prefer not to go. Overviews of population density in the medieval or early modern period are not reconstructed by specialists of historical demography but by specialists in other sub-disciplines of history, such as social and economic history. This short article should be read as a call to historical demographers to care more about those periods they have long shunned in order to avoid the need to deal with unfamiliar sources. To tackle these difficult periods for which we lack complete and continuous sources, more creativity is needed, as well as a greater willingness to think about pre-industrial demographic regimes without having all the data one would like to have at hand. And a slightly more pragmatic attitude might help as well.

But first of all: why should historical demographers even bother? To begin with, the post-1800 period is – seen from the very long-term perspective – (although in demographic terms a very important one [says the economic historian...]), the focus on the years after 1800 leaves us in the dark about the foundations of our current demographic regime. Why had the Western-European demographic regime already shifted away from that of the rest of the world before 1800? And why are some regions in the world still 'stuck' in a regime that looks similar to European medieval demographic behaviour? Economic historians would really like to know the answer to these questions, so they can use that information to better estimate the impact of changes that take place at the very basis of society and the economy. Second, many nineteenth-century developments have had, and continue

to have, a deep impact on our life expectancy. But focusing primarily on these positive developments severely limits our understanding of the ‘default’ situation; in other words, a situation without increasing hygiene, without new obstetric practices, etc. As historical demographers, our knowledge on individual health prior to the 1800s is heavily dependent on what biologists and – for even earlier periods – archaeologists can tell us. But often, these perspectives lack a thorough understanding of the historical context. Biologists are driven by their interest in understanding evolution, and hence primarily search for those conditions that are common to all humans, regardless of the societies they live in. Archaeologists are usually interested in periods that are so remote that historians don’t even think about them in terms of consolidated societies – or at least lack the data to support such claims. Historical demography would be the discipline best suited to add knowledge not only about environmental conditions but also about the economic context, the role of social conditions in partnering, and the methods at hand for limiting fertility. All of these are vital to our understanding of the link between human capital and family formation. They are also relevant to how individuals behave as parts of groups, how these groups in turn form societies, and to whether and how these societies develop institutions to cope with changes in demographic behaviour. To give just one example: from a purely biological perspective, the nuclear households and late ages at first marriage that we find in Northwestern Europe from the Late Middle Ages onwards are poor choices (Laslett 1983). Pooling income and keeping fertility as high as possible would have been a much better strategy to spread risks and increase the survival chances of the population. But Northwestern Europe has been thriving on this supposedly sub-optimal model for a long time (Hajnal 1965). Understanding this evolution demands that we understand what role institutions had in ‘countering’ the negative side-effects of a marriage pattern that may have influenced Western economic development in a substantial way (De Moor & van Zanden 2010). But getting a clear picture of the demographic parameters which represent and influence household formation is not a straightforward operation...

What has kept historical demographers from digging deeper *en masse* until now? The things that make the discipline so attractive and solid are also, in my view, what keep it from thinking out of the box a little bit more. Although other historical disciplines can learn a great deal from the quantitative rigour and methodological specificity exemplified by historical demographers, it can also be a limitation to creativity in searching for new approaches to use sources and combine methods. Our focus might need to shift somewhat away from analysis towards synthesis and an understanding of long-term demographic trends. It would make many specialists of adjacent fields happy if specialists in historical demography would dare to dig deeper, and – though this might a bit of an exaggeration – to boldly go where no demographic historian has gone before. By doing so, they could provide a more solid demographic basis – both methodological and empirical – that would allow others to study the richness of history in all its dimensions.

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Biography

Tine De Moor coordinates a team of researchers at Utrecht University working on the development of institutions for collective action and the long-term changes in family patterns in Europe. Her research interests include European marriage patterns throughout the late medieval and early modern periods.

Historical demography in the very long run: how long is very long?

Walter Scheidel

How far back does historical demography go? It used to be thought that the lack or poor quality of quantitative or quantifiable evidence from early societies prevented serious demographers from reaching back more than a few centuries. After all, if “demography without numbers is waffle”, as David Schofield memorably put it thirty years ago, how can we hope to engage with the more distant past? Even so, the time frontier has steadily been pushed back. Ancient demography has carved out a small but growing niche within population studies, with “ancient” referring to conditions thousands rather than merely hundreds of years ago. Egyptian papyrus documents that preserve census records from the Roman period have been milked for valuable insights into life expectancy, fertility regimes, household structure and arguably even nuclear-family incest as far back as 2,000 years ago. Ancient Greek and Roman tombstone inscriptions that have survived in vast numbers from different parts of the Mediterranean basin reveal distinctive seasonal distributions of mortality that hint at the nature of the underlying disease environment and allow us to track continuity and change over two millennia. They also enable us to explore the antiquity of the so-called Mediterranean marriage pattern or the regional prevalence of endogamy. While the Mediterranean holds pride of place in these endeavours, East Asia likewise contributes useful data. Lineage records from China that go back into antiquity have been used to reconstruct life expectancy, while the Standard Histories are replete with detailed census tallies and a number of original census registrations from the Tang period have also come to light. And sometimes we can go even further back in time. Pioneering work has been performed on the records from the workers’ village of Deir-el-Medina that serviced the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings in Upper Egypt during the New Kingdom period, three and a half millennia ago. It has found that its residents suffered from higher rates of illness at exactly the same time of the year as when elevated mortality appears in regional funerary records 1,500 or 2,500 or even 3,300 years later.

Yet beyond a certain point this kind of research cannot be extended into an ever more distant past, if only because writing itself dates back no more than 5,000 years, and much less than that in most of the world. This is where other

types of evidence come in, most notably the human body. Here I am thinking less of paleodemography, the quest to derive longevity and sex ratios and related matters from the assemblage of skeletons recovered from cemeteries. The debate on this issue has been drawn-out and often frustrating: every so often we are told that the problems of reliably aging adult bones have now been solved, and yet we must continue to wonder if the demographic extrapolations are correct, let alone representative. But perhaps we have been asking the wrong questions. The one thing that bones are really good at telling us about is migration. Isotope signatures indicate whether individuals had moved far from where they had been born, and where that birthplace might have been. Ancient DNA is now adding another layer of vital information: while not so long ago the analysis of DNA extracted from ancient bones seemed like “Jurassic Park”-style science fiction, it is now quickly becoming standard procedure. All of a sudden, it has become possible for a man from East Asia, possibly China, to be identified at a Roman burial site in southern Italy – and that is just one example. The sequencing of ancient, medieval and modern DNA from Tuscany suggests that the Etruscans were more closely related to Eastern Mediterranean populations than later inhabitants of this region, and that medieval and modern Tuscans may not descend from the Etruscans at all. DNA likewise helps to diagnose causes of death: we can finally be sure that the plague pandemic that ravaged western Eurasia for two hundred years starting in 541 CE really was the same disease as the Black Death of the Late Middle Ages. But we do not even need DNA from the past to recover demographic information. The genetic makeup of present-day populations forms a giant archive of differential reproduction and migration that reaches back to the beginnings of our species. This line of research, which focuses on blood alleles, has a longer pedigree than ancient DNA studies and has produced a steady flow of striking results. For instance, the observation that male ancestors from the Aegean region made a large contribution to the Y-chromosomal make-up of contemporary Sicilians or the inhabitants of the Marseille area (prominent destinations of ancient Greek colonizers over 2,500 years ago), whereas corresponding female contributions are lacking, tells us much about the sex ratio of past population transfers and the violent nature of settlement. Similar patterns have been observed in many other target areas for foreign takeovers, from England to Turkey and China and the New World.

But how far back do we want to go? As far back as the moment when anatomically modern humans first moved out of Africa? What does a newly discovered jawbone of a man who lived 40,000 years ago and carried up to 9 percent Neanderthal DNA tell us about mating practices in the very remote past? Most importantly, should we care? Does this fall within the remit of historical demography? It may be tempting to say that all this is a matter for other disciplines to deal with, and that is surely true as far as data gathering and processing are concerned – but where are the temporal boundaries for demographic interpretation? The existence of conventional archives of written material is not an intellectually satisfying criterion for inclusion or exclusion. At the very least, historical demographers need to be

aware of these new types of evidence and analyses, appreciate the new horizons they open up, and think about how to engage with this brave new world. It goes without saying – but I will say it anyway – that transdisciplinary collaboration will be an indispensable means to this end.

Further reading

Scheidel, W. (Ed.) (2017). *The Science of Roman History: Biology, Climate and the Future of the Past*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Scheidel, W. (forthcoming). *The Demography of the Greco-Roman World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Biography

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