

The Centrality of Demography in the Social Sciences.

Historically social scientists have assumed that economics is the central discipline in the social sciences. This is partly the influence of Marx as well as the dominance of free market liberalism.

In his discussion of the history of Russia, John Maynard Keynes wrote:

‘European Russia increased her population ... from less than 100,000,000 in 1890 to about 150,000,000 at the outbreak of war, and in the years immediately preceding 1914 the ... inordinate growth in the population of Russia ... has been nevertheless one of the most significant facts of recent years. The great events of history are often due to secular changes in the growth of population and other fundamental economic causes, escaping by their gradual character the notice of contemporary observers, are attributed to the follies of statesmen or the fanaticism of atheists. Thus the extraordinary occurrences of the past two years in Russia, that vast upheaval of Society which has overturned what seemed most stable – religion, the basis of property, the ownership of land, as well as forms of government and the hierarchy of classes – may owe more to the deep influences of expanding numbers than to Lenin or to Nicholas, and the disruptive powers of excessive national fecundity may have played a greater part in bursting the bonds of convention than either the power of ideas or the errors of aristocracy.’¹

There is increasing evidence that demography has been neglected in its central role in both history and contemporary life. The “urban penalty” in mortality may have been a factor in the decline of the Roman Empire. Philip Matyszak has written: ‘historians blamed the fall of Rome on depopulation, pointing to references in the ancient texts to plagues and *agri deserti* (‘abandoned fields’). Certainly, by the end of the Empire, a few thousand men counted as a substantial army whereas in the glory days of the Republic a single legion contained 6,000 men.’² The invading Huns, Visigoths and other barbarian tribes lived in more rural environments and therefore would not have been prone to high levels of infection.³

H.J. Habakkuk has summarized the role of population growth in shaping the economic structure of English history:

‘long-term movements in prices, in income distribution ... in real wages ... are dominated by changes in the growth of population. Rising population: rising prices ... low real incomes for the mass of the population ... this might stand for a description of the thirteenth century, the sixteenth century, and the early seventeenth, and the period 1750-1815. Falling or stationary population with ... higher mass incomes might be said to be characteristic of the intervening periods.’⁴

This assumes that population growth was independent of economic development, and there is increasing evidence that growth in Britain was mainly due to changes in ecology and disease incidence.⁵

Malthus argued that there had been a diminution in the frequency of marriage during the eighteenth century:

¹ John Maynard Keynes, ‘The Economic Consequences of Peace’ in *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, 2017, p.370.

² Philip Matyszak, *The Enemies of Rome: From Hannibal to Attila the Hun*, 2023, p. 283.

³ P.E. Razzell, ‘Demography and the Decline of the Roman Empire’, *Online Peter Razzell*

⁴ P.E Razzell, *Essays in Historical Sociology*, 2021, p, 222.

⁵ See P.E. Razzell, ‘Population Growth in Britain, 1538-1850’ to be published in *Family and Community History*.

The gradual diminution and almost total extinction of the plagues which so frequently visited Europe, in the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, produced a change [in the incidence of marriage] ... in this country [England] it is not to be doubted that the proportion of marriages has become smaller since the improvement of our towns, the less frequent return of epidemics, and the adoption of habits of greater cleanliness.’⁶

The decrease in the frequency of marriage led to a reduction in population growth and is a further example of demographic determinism.

Although Ireland lagged severely behind England in terms of real incomes, Irish population increased more rapidly than England’s in the eighteenth century. This is illustrated by the following Table:

Table 1: Estimated Population Growth in Ireland and England & Wales, 1697-1791.⁷

<i>Ireland Population History</i>		<i>England Population History</i>	
Period	Population Size (1000s)	Period	Population Size (1000s)
1706	2060	1700/1	5,475
1753	2570	1750/1	6,467
1791	4420	1790/1	8,675

Ireland’s population grew more rapidly than England’s even though it was much poorer. This was largely due to the benefits of geographical isolation, which can be illustrated by an analysis of the Irish 1841 Census, comparing the mortality rates of urban and rural districts

Table 2: Agee Specific Death Rates According to the 1841 Irish Census.⁸

<i>Age Group (Years)</i>	<i>Number Living in Urban Areas</i>	<i>Deaths Per 1000</i>	<i>Number Living in Rural Districts</i>	<i>Deaths Per 1000</i>
Under 1	50,369	138.02	311,055	81.35
2-5	105,676	45.49	779,313	17.22
6-15	243,551	9.78	1,813,605	4.51
16-25	242,237	9.90	1,403,660	6.56
26-35	181,208	13.34	973,169	8.34
36-45	132,481	18.42	696,961	11.43

Mortality in the urban areas was up to twice as high as in the rural districts, with 1,135,465 people living in urban areas and 7,039,659 in the rural districts. Ireland’s rural lower mortality was probably the result of its geographical isolation, avoiding high levels of infection. They lived in scattered settlements in a country that was separated from England and the continent of Europe. Freeman has estimated that in 1841 only about 20 per cent of the Irish population lived in villages and towns, the rest in isolated cabins.⁹

⁶ Ibid, p. 149.

⁷ K.H. Connell, *The Population of Ireland 1750-1845*, 1950; J. Rickman, *Observations on the Results of the Population Act, 41 Geo III*, p. 91.

⁸ Connell. *The Population of Ireland*, p. 193.

⁹ T.W. Freeman, *Pre-Famine Ireland: A Study in Historical Geography*, 1957, p. 27.

Eventually Ireland suffered from numerous famines because increase of population.¹⁰ This illustrates the central importance of population growth in Ireland's history and further illustrates the centrality of demographic development.

¹⁰ Connell. *The Population of Ireland*.