
REVIEW ARTICLES

*Urbanization and Population Dynamics in History **

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Approximately fifty invited scholars and a small number of informal guests gathered to discuss the role of population processes in historical urbanization. In addition to the rich intellectual fare which this report will try to suggest, the participants savoured the blend of efficiency and hospitality offered by their hosts. The work of Professor Akira Hayami must be singled out, since he not only chaired the Local Organizing Committee most actively but also served as one of the scientific organizers in his capacity as member of the Committee on Historical Demography. In six intensive half-day sessions the seminar members considered some thirty-seven papers as well as introductory comments by the session Chairmen and a summing-up lecture. Since most of the papers had been circulated in advance, it was possible to limit considerably the time devoted to presentation in the interests of more ample comment and response. Although a wide variety of topics and disciplines were represented, the largest number of papers (17) dealt with four countries: England, France, China, and Japan. A further thirteen involved other areas of Europe, notably Spain and Scandinavia, while four were concerned with the Americas. Chronologically, the papers ranged from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries with a concentration on the nineteenth. The parity of French and English as seminar languages was honoured in the breach and in the customary direction.

An adequate summary of so many papers in a short report is certainly beyond the skill of the present rapporteur. In any case, they will be published. In addition, their value may be judged by the lively discussion they provoked, and

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this report will focus on the themes and questions that captured most of the attention. In this connection it is difficult to do justice to the contributions of individuals, and no attempt is made systematically to attribute particular ideas or views.

The subject of the first session was urban demography, and this was indeed the most "demographic" of the discussions. The session Chairmen, J. Dupâquier, invited the participants to consider the specificity of urban demography in the pre-transitional and transitional period. Yet as much attention was devoted to rural-urban interactions, whose intensity implies mutual influence if not similarity or convergence. Indeed, the recognition that town and country, while remaining distinctive, were in constant contact pointed ahead to the topic of migration and to what would emerge as perhaps the single strongest theme of the seminar, the high mobility of pre-industrial populations.

Urban populations have historically exhibited lower (and often negative) rates of natural change than the larger society in which they were embedded, this despite a favourable age structure due to the presence of young adult migrants. This paradoxical result can be traced to lower nuptiality, to lower fertility in marriage, or to higher mortality. All played a part in early modern Europe in particular. Notice was taken of the importance of domestic servants who remained single, of wet-nursing, and of city size and its links to epidemic disease, among other factors. Urban families also took the lead in limiting family size, but whether because of a more rational, i.e. modern, response than their rural counterparts were capable of, or because they were confronted with more compelling needs remained open to debate. Though hard to pin down, the role of cultural factors or *mentalités* is difficult to discard. At the same time, the inelastic urban society of pre-industrial times could, in the absence of mortality accidents, put pressure on families that did not restrict the number of children.

The rural areas that contributed migrants to cities were also demographically affected. The pressure of population on the land was lessened, meaning that certain changes might be postponed and that opportunities, e.g. for marriage, did not deteriorate. In that sense the presence of towns was a conservative force for the country. However, because the flow of people was not one-way, rural patterns of thought and behaviour were affected as well, and change presumably hastened. Returning migrants or travellers were not the same as when they had left, whether they brought back radical ideas, a modest capital, or the germs from an epidemic kept active in the denser urban environment.

The second session shifted the focus only somewhat, since migration and migrants permeate any discussion of urban demography. In opening the session from the chair, E. Hélin reminded the participants of aspects of the question beyond movement from country to town, notably going overseas, inter- and intra-urban migration, and the reverse flow from the city. Moreover, he noted that the distinction between internal and foreign migration is anachronistic for much of history, illustrating the point with the web of ties that bound eighteenth-century Liège to so much of Europe, from Rome (religion and culture) to

Amsterdam (export of manufactures) and from Vienna (the Holy Roman Empire) to Paris (language).

In the economic perspective, migration is most closely tied to labour market considerations. It thus depends on urban opportunities relative to rural conditions, but the former are not identical with growth in the urban economy, since controls and discriminatory practices have often limited what migrants could aspire to, whether in Osaka or Cuenca (Spain). Indeed, the amount of migration and the much greater incidence of gross mobility involving towns suggest that no great stimulus was needed to get at least many young people to pull up stakes. Nowhere is this more striking than in nineteenth-century Scandinavia, where the gradients of opportunity and reward seem very weak in relation to the intensity of movement, while flows are almost balanced by counterflows? While the homogeneity of the population and the modest distances involved are not typical, the quality of the data, so much higher than elsewhere, causes one to wonder whether the ease of movement has not been underestimated in other areas.

Migration is a social and human process as well as an economic one, of course. The question of who migrated, leaving aside those catastrophic episodes when any and all might do so, proved intriguing. One can picture the migrant in many ways: as a country bumpkin who will be civilized by the city; as a loser in the rural competition for place and spouse; as a literate misfit in the tight-knit, homogeneous, traditional village community; as an enterprising and ambitious striver, eager for a larger arena in which to struggle. Yet migration need not be an adventure. The migrant may tread a well-worn path, with people at both ends who organize the move and little uncertainty as to its implications. Nonetheless, as E. Hélin pointed out, the migrant is likely to prove an agent of change if only because he or she is forced to adapt. Finally, if (gross) emigration from towns has also been common, there is scope here too to ask who left.

The discussion turned more abstract in the third session, devoted to urban systems or networks and to the rank-size distributions by which urban hierarchies are often described. There was general agreement that the rank-size rule and more sophisticated uses of entire rank-size distributions, while useful tools, suffer from at least three limitations. First, they consider only population size, whereas there are other dimensions to the "importance" of a city and to the nature of its relationship with other places. This, of course, is a less telling criticism in the context of the present seminar than in the study of urbanization generally. Secondly, distributions of city size at a point in time are difficult to relate to questions of urban growth over time, which are of primary concern to historical research. And finally, the mathematical elegance of the rank-size rule tempts one to attach meretricious normative significance to certain distributions. With these limitations in mind, rank-size distributions are useful ways of describing complicated sets of data and talking about urban systems in relatively precise ways.

Much of the discussion turned on the implications of primacy, i.e. the

disproportionate development of a single centre, and of the degree of hierarchy in the ordering, as shown by the steepness of slope in the logarithmic rank-size graph. While primacy testifies to the ability of a society to sustain a very large centre, no mean feat in terms of supply, the Europeanists were conscious that this metropolis might drain an entire realm and inhibit other urban development. Similarly, while C. Smith pointed to increasing hierarchy as the concomitant of developing labour markets in third-world economies, historians of European urbanization saw virtue in oligarchic groupings of middle-size cities with somewhat complementary functions, as in the Low Countries and (more recently) in Switzerland.

Beyond the analysis of population hierarchies, the study of urban systems is concerned with interurban relations, with regions and their cities (or central places and their service areas), and with networks of long-distance trade. Political, commercial and cultural flows bind cities to one another, giving rise to particular criteria of importance and to richer ways of identifying and characterizing systems and their evolution. Thus, E. François focused on publishing and intellectual employment in charting the displacement and restructuring of urban Germany between 1600 and 1800. On the other hand, E. A. Wrigley's argument about the interaction of urbanization and agricultural development in England was open to the observation that the regional urban systems in the south and east grew modestly during the period in question, urbanization being concentrated in industrializing areas and ports. Finally, G.W. Skinner and S. Itoh found it useful to look at functional types in their studies of urban growth and systems in China and Japan.

East Asia provided the focus for the fourth session, with a single paper on the Phillipines serving to remind (or teach) parochial Westerners that Southeast Asia should be recognized as a quite distinct entity. There was relatively more concern for sources of data and for the presentation of research results in this session, since so much less work has been done by modern historians and that little is unfamiliar to most historians of Western populations. From the point of view of an outsider, it was striking to note how long the history of urbanization is, notably in China and Japan, yet how recent the move to a largely urban and industrialized society. M. Cartier's attempt to extract a measure of the urban population from the 1982 census of China (PRC) offers a dramatic illustration. Notwithstanding the contrasts with Europe, there were points of comparison, which G. Rozman and G.W. Skinner helped clarify. Also, it was possible to apply to Asian urbanization data some of the concepts developed by students of Western societies, as the Asian scholars systematically did in their papers. The lingering mortality from cholera and dysentery, in the Japanese transition from negative to positive urban natural change, could be compared to the lasting ravages of alcoholism in Swedish towns mooted by G. Fridlitzius, while tuberculosis afflicted both. And the ecology of the Kyoto silk weavers studied by T. Hareven shows many points in common, as well as revealing differences, with Europe's domestic industries.

Examples can be multiplied. G.W. Skinner found urban regions in France that exhibited a topographic unity akin to that found in the urban systems of China. On the other hand, Japan, like England, had weaker regional systems and more developed ports and industrial centres than the continental neighbours of both; the former were more fully integrated, the latter more like groupings of regions. While the value to Asian scholars of comparative work and discussion is amply evidenced by their efforts in making the seminar a reality, students of the West also gained much in the exchange.

In the fifth session economic considerations again came to the fore, along with questions about the relations of town and country. Because economic models, even informal ones, can easily become somewhat abstract, it was fortunate that the discussion began with a lively exchange regarding the material supply needs of modest European towns of the pre-industrial period. This was touched off by a comment from A. van der Woude on P. Bairoch's paper concerning the role of land yields, labour productivity, and transportation in loosening the traditional constraints on urbanization. It seems likely that providing the town with sufficient wood may have been a greater task, in a physical sense, than keeping it fed.

With this salutary reminder not to ignore basic realities, the participants tackled the question of how massive urbanization could be initiated. Economists tend to think of exchange, looking in other words for a process whereby towns would produce goods to exchange for food and raw materials in ever-increasing quantities. However, this mechanism for development stumbles on two historical points. First, the principal thrust of proto-industrial and early-factory industry was rural rather than centering on major established towns. Second, the flow of surplus from the land, which had fueled much of the urban growth in the early modern period, relied a great deal on unilateral transfers. Increasing urbanization depended on agricultural improvement, notably greater labour productivity, but also on transferring the increasing surpluses as well as the "freed-up" labour force. R. McNinn put the emphasis on this "indirect" mechanism in his study of why Catalonia failed to follow up a promising start to development. It was noted that regions of complementarity between good agricultural practice and strong urbanization had long existed in Europe, but they played little part in early industrialization. Instead it was England which dramatically improved its agriculture and also achieved a precocious and long unique level of urbanization. Of course, the commitment to overseas trade with primary-producing areas played a part as well.

One can look to the direct impact of agricultural improvement on urbanization by noting the role of cheaper food, after 1870 or so, in bringing down urban mortality. However, there is a further, and earlier connection between agricultural progress and industrialization, one brought out in the proto-industrialization model. The large concentrations of manufactures — not all of which were exclusively or principally rural, by any means — relied on elastic supplies of food and often fibres from regions of commercial agriculture.

Moreover, there is a direct connection between rural proto-industrialization and later massive urban growth, since it is fairly well accepted that a large share of rural-to-urban migrants came from non-agricultural occupations, for example domestic workers displaced by mechanized production.

Since the ambitious task of integrating the discussion in a synthesis of the contributions to the seminar was entrusted to the present rapporteur, it is unnecessary to summarize the final lecture here. However, certain themes recurred from session to session, and a brief review can serve by way of conclusion.

As can be expected, the term urbanization itself posed questions. Does it refer to the (presumably) one-time passage from a mostly rural to a primarily urban society? Or is it the study of urban development in general, including the initial formation of urban systems and fluctuations in their structure and share of total population? The former view draws on the clear qualitative difference between a minority of non-producers of food in a basically agrarian society and a population massively devoted to manufacturing and services with only a small fraction assuring the supply of basic commodities. Moreover, the links with other large-scale social transformations, such as industrialization or the rise of capitalism, make it clear that a change in kind took place. Yet it is precisely the danger of conflating urbanization with other processes, and so losing its specificity, that made certain participants eager to reserve the term for the study of urban development while broadening its use to include urban change within the constraints of traditional technology and economic organization.

As may be imagined, many participants raised questions of sources, data, and methodology, usually in a cautionary spirit. While these specialists' concerns do not lend themselves to capsule summary, one thread of commentary does touch on the argument just alluded to. Questions of sources and definition make it quite probable that the measured increase in urban proportion — urbanization in the technical sense of urban population as a fraction of the total — tends to overstate growth in the impact of urban life. Among the sources of bias are the size threshold, which counts as newly urban the total population of a centre when it achieves the magic number, and the failure to acknowledge as urban many who have lived in towns between censuses or whose marginal status does not entitle them to be numbered among a town's population.

The participants made conscious efforts to distinguish types of urban settlements and urban populations. Yet they could not fully avoid the pitfalls posed by blanket terms such as rural and urban. Again and again, they had to remind themselves and each other that there are not only specificities of time and place but differences based on the size and functions of towns. An example, of great quantitative importance in the industrial age, is afforded by the great industrial conurbations, notably in the coal basins. These undoubtedly were distinctive demographically, just as they were in spatial and social terms. The use of a systems perspective can help refine important functional distinctions, given the inherent and inescapable openness of cities.

The degree of mobility of populations before the industrial age was repeatedly stressed in the papers and the discussion. At least this is the view from the urban side, bearing in mind that great mobility in the share of the population with some urban experience is not incompatible with a substantial non-mobile, permanently rural group so long as the society is not heavily urbanized. Still, the extent of mobility continued to surprise and its implications to fascinate. The migrant came to be seen as not much more than a sub-category of the *sojourner*, the person who spends some time in a town but does not break the ties to a rural home (or one in another town). While a move may be planned as temporary or permanent, the historian of population cannot fathom intentions but only hope to record experience, which may or may not bear them out. The most clear-cut statistical evidence of the dominance of mobility over definitive migration comes from data on emigration from towns back to the country, which the exceptional Scandinavian records furnish in abundance but which offer clear evidence also for Spain (D. Reher) and Germany (H. Schultz). Beyond the statistical dimension, the confirmation of a long-standing tradition of mobility stimulates reassessment of the human and cultural implications of migration and urbanization. To the extent that migrants found the city an alien and hostile environment, the problem most often came from the circumstances in which they had left their place of origin. Although many experienced downward mobility by moving, the supply of migrants seldom flagged. Even re-emigration can be seen in two ways: as the evidence of frequent disappointment and as a sign that the initial departure was normally a far from desperate and irreversible undertaking.

