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From Provinces into Nations: Demographic Integration in Western Europe, 1870-1960 by Susan Cotts Watkins

Review by: Craig Calhoun

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From Provinces into Nations: Demographic Integration in Western Europe, 1870–1960. By *Susan Cotts Watkins*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991. Pp. xvii + 235. \$42.50.

Studies of fertility transition are among the most familiar contributions of historical demography. Indeed, modernity has come to be defined, in part, by substantial reduction in the number of children born to populations of adult women. Lots of effort has gone into dating the transition and accounting for variations in its onset and pace. For the most part, however, the explanatory model has remained relatively stable: (1) industrialization and related socioeconomic changes altered the cost-benefit calculus by which individuals and couples decided whether and when to have children, and when to stop having them, and (2) availability of progressively better birth control technology enabled people to exercise their freedom of choice more efficaciously. There are debates about the relative importance of each major factor, but there has been surprisingly little debate about the underlying assumption that some manner of rational individual calculation is the basic causal factor. Individualistic rational choice theory is the implicit guide to most demographic analysis.

Recently, a number of demographers have begun to complement attention to individual calculation with examination of broader social and cultural factors. *From Provinces into Nations* is among the more interesting of these efforts. In it, Susan Cotts Watkins starts from the observation that there was not only higher fertility in nineteenth-century Europe than a hundred years later but much greater variation in fertility rates. Localities, regions, and countries all varied more in the number of live births per woman in 1870 than in 1960. As Watkins's title implies, the production of uniformity was greatest within national boundaries.

Watkins's argument consists of two main parts. The first and most convincing is her demonstration of progressive uniformity of demographic behavior. She looks not only at fertility but also at tendency to marry and at legitimacy of children. All three sets of rates become more consistent throughout Europe, but substantially more so within national boundaries. Watkins supplements her general statistics with specific examinations of border provinces (e.g., the Basque country in both France and Spain), which clearly show increasing homogeneity within nation-state borders and decreasing homogeneity within the transborder region or ethnicity. The main weakness to this part of Watkins's account is a willingness to accept rather ad hoc explanations of exceptions to the overall pattern. In Italy, for example, demographic diversity increased during the fertility transition (even while other diversities, like those of language, decreased). Watkins basically suggests that the "earlier demographic homogeneity may be deceptive" (p. 44). Despite this concern, it seems clear that Watkins has identified a significant trend toward demographic uniformity as part of the fertility transition.

The second part of Watkins's argument is her effort to show that the growing uniformity was not produced simply by similar structural patterns determining individual interests throughout countries. A central part of Watkins's agenda is to show that individualistic cost-benefit calculations are not an adequate way to understand fertility rates. Though she is not very explicit about this, she is in fact joining in a general argument for the importance of culture to rational choice explanations. The gist of her position is that through social communication people learn norms about the "appropriate" number of children to have, how close together they should come, how important it is for them to be legitimate, and a host of other matters. In short, these seemingly "private" decisions are shaped by broader culture. This seems undoubtedly true to me, but unfortunately it is not altogether demonstrated in the book. For the most

part, Watkins relies on correlations between demographic changes and processes of market integration, linguistic standardization (her measure of “nation-building”), and expansion of state functions. These are generally consistent with Watkins’s argument but not conclusive. Thus market integration and state expansion could be held to affect demographic behavior mainly through giving people similar interests on which to base their individual calculations. Only the correlations between declining linguistic diversity and more uniform demographic behavior clearly support Watkins’s argument more than the conventional rational choice one.

Watkins has a compelling idea, but she does not develop any very detailed empirical arguments as to the causal links between broader cultural, political, and economic factors and demographic trends. She relies “more on logical extrapolations from consistent findings than on the direct analysis” of links between these factors and demographic change (p. 176). Watkins’s main model for a link between culture or social groups and individual demographic decision making is community gossip. It seems clear that women gathering in small groups exert social control by criticizing deviant behavior and describing preferred behaviors. This, Watkins suggests, was a major factor in determining premodern demographic behavior. Where other demographers see a shift from such social control to individual freedom (aided by better birth control techniques), Watkins sees a shift from “social control by a smaller group to social control by a larger group” (p. 178). Watkins’s evidence against the notion of pure individual choice (not really a very plausible idea in the first place) is much stronger than her evidence *for* any particular form of “social control by a larger group.” Thus the very fact of increasing uniformity in demographic behavior strongly suggests that some supraindividual factors are at work (though as noted, these might be working by structuring circumstances and interests rather than thought patterns). But is social control a good model for these larger forces?

Watkins seems to be thinking of cultural diffusion in modern societies as a matter of village gossip writ large and carried out through newspapers. She writes repeatedly of the economic, political, and linguistic integration she describes as producing “larger communities” with more people who are recognized as “like us.” The similarity should enable both the spread of information and the exercise of social control. I suspect, however, that the processes at work in large states (and internationally) are poorly described as simply the expansion of community. Certainly the promulgation of images of appropriate family size does take place: one could look at everything from novels to women’s magazines to pictures in advertisements and newspaper advice columns. But are these social control in the same sense as gossip among a tightly knit group of neighbors? To be brief, Watkins needs a more developed theory of culture and of large-scale social relations. She needs to describe, for example, how people one does not know (like film stars) and who may not exist (like characters in novels and TV shows) may take on crucial significance as reference groups, and how these abstract and/or distant reference groups relate to discourse (and social control) among those one knows well.

Lacking a strong account of how large-scale cultural and social change influences demographic behavior, Watkins’s book is perhaps most interesting for its introduction of demographic uniformity as an index of the growing salience of nation-states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is also valuable, however, for its suggestion of a kind of research historical demographers (and simply historians prepared to take demography seriously) might do if they would refocus their attention away from purely individualistic decision-making models and the pursuit of technical refinements. That this will not be easy is suggested indirectly by Watkins’s own style.

She writes at length on details of her methodology and answers all sorts of possible criticisms of her main finding of progressive demographic uniformity (this part of the book is written like a very long journal article). This seems to be the quarter from which she fears professional criticism. But when she turns to developing an account of cultural and social life that could specify the sources of changing demographic behavior she is content to be very general and to settle for rather thin descriptions of actual relationships and behavior. Watkins shares this fault with most contemporary fertility research, but she deserves credit for trying to break out of its narrow range of problems and approaches.

CRAIG CALHOUN

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570–1700. By *Stephen Foster*.

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991. Pp. xx + 395. \$39.95.

Historians have devoted much time and energy to defining “Puritanism,” to revealing its inner essence, whether in theological or social terms. Stephen Foster thinks the whole quest has been mistaken and ahistorical. The word “Puritan” defines “a loose and incomplete alliance of progressive Protestants, lay and clerical, aristocratic and humble, who were never quite sure whether they were the vanguard or the remnant.” This movement “altered its tactics and its emphases as its fortunes varied over time, and . . . was never homogeneous at any single period” (pp. 4–5).

Before 1629 Puritans hoped to work through parliamentary politics, “tarrying for the magistrate.” But Puritans never dominated the House of Commons: “Puritan politics was for much of the period a tale of reduced expectations, lesser goods traded for greater, and alliances built on lowest common denominators” (p. 118). Politics was the art of the possible. After 1629, the end of Parliaments, Laud made accommodation increasingly impossible. God seemed to be leaving England. Many of the godly emigrated. Even Winthrop warned of “a social war in England as bitter and as violent as the Peasants’ War had been in Germany” (p. 111). He was not alone.

Puritans reacted differently in old and New England. New England Congregationalism was what we call “Presbyterianism” in the reign of Elizabeth. In old England conservative Puritans after 1640 recognized the danger of too much congregational democracy: we call them “Presbyterians.” English radical Puritans moved to a congregationalism prepared to tolerate sectaries, very different from that of New England (pp. 53–54, 61). After 1640 New England was no longer just a refuge and hiding place for the godly: they controlled the church-state alliance of clergy, gentry, and propertied laity. This alliance survived in England from Elizabeth’s reign until 1640 and continued for a century longer in New England (p. 288). But the magistracy there was weaker than in old England, more dependent on the clergy, less anticlerical. Magistracy and clergy united to curb the potentially explosive democratic element drawn—Foster thinks—from later refugees from Laudianism (pp. 138–39).

Escape from the ecclesiastical hierarchy led Puritanism in New England to diverge widely from that which had been left behind. The original saints had been clearly visible, under persecution, in exile in the Netherlands, among the original settlers of New England. Later immigrants had to pass the test of the conversion narrative to establish their sanctity. Presbyterians in England wanted to preserve a comprehensive