



EDITED BY JAN HANSEN, JOCHEN HUNG, JAROSLAV IRA,
JUDIT KLEMENT, SYLVAIN LESAGE, JUAN LUIS SIMAL, AND
ANDREW TOMPKINS

THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



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2.1.1 Demographic Change in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

Sarah Carmichael and András Vadas

Introduction

Most scholars agree that the European region saw its population almost double between 1500 and 1750, followed by an even greater surge in population levels as Europe entered the era of the industrial revolution. This post-Black Death period was one of uneven improvements in welfare and the intensification of land use, which fed ever larger numbers of mouths. The wealth from European colonies also encouraged many to work longer hours, so that they could afford small luxuries. But at the end of this period—in the time of British economic theorist and cleric Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834)—worries about how resources would keep up with rising population levels became ever more prominent. Disease, malnutrition, and the interplay of the two could easily tip populations over into periods of high mortality. Yet many historians are critical of the assumption made by many present-day journalists that, because average life expectancy in the early modern period was around thirty to thirty-five years of age, no one lived to see old age. In fact, for individuals who made it through their first five years of life, the outlook was quite decent. In general, those who lived into their early twenties could expect to live to their sixties (approximately, with some variation depending on time and place). This chapter sketches early modern developments in fertility and mortality, framed around Malthus's model, to give the reader a general sense of demographic trends across Europe. First, however, it discusses sources and methodological problems in the study of these facets of early modern society.

Types of Sources and Methodological Problems

The early modern period is the earliest for which there is relatively precise data on demographic behaviour and population change for some parts of Europe.

Different political entities and self-governing bodies started to register their inhabitants for several reasons, the two most important being taxation and state control. The period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century also saw the written form take precedence over oral tradition throughout Europe. This led both individuals and administrative bodies to produce more detailed registers than ever before.

The act of registering people is not an early modern invention; some forms of census existed in Ancient Rome as well as in several medieval polities, cities, and ecclesiastical bodies. Conscription and taxation data have their methodological limitations, as these sources were not created to come to an estimate of the complete population or its demographic features. Nonetheless, some of the sources provide data that allow for estimates of population dynamics. The appearance of registers for tax (religious tithe and state tax), household and estate conscriptions, church registers, and canonical visitations appeared in different phases of the early modern period in different parts of Europe, but ultimately most polities created similar records. There is however an almost complete lack of overall population surveys—censuses—until the eighteenth century. It was only at the beginning of the eighteenth century that the first proper censuses were conducted in north-western Europe (Denmark, Iceland, Prussia, and Sweden are pioneers in this respect). In the latter half of the eighteenth century, many Western and Central European polities also began to recognise the importance of conducting surveys of their populations. As a result, by the turn of the nineteenth century there were complete censuses, or at least initiatives to carry them out, in the majority of Europe's polities.

For most of the early modern period, however, scholars rely on partial datasets that were put down in writing for purposes other than surveying complete populations. While some of them, like parish registers, provide data that allows a better understanding of demographic features than many early censuses, these early modern sources all survive in highly scattered forms, even in areas with the best source coverage, such as the Low Countries, England, France, or Italy. Even if parish registers have survived, it is challenging to reconstruct demographic processes or family structures from them. Other sources, such as tithe and other tax records, as well as estate conscriptions (such as land registers, manorial rolls, and *urbaria*—all forms of recording property ownership) also provide information that in many cases censuses do not. However, these sources present different methodological barriers from church registers. While some of them cover major areas, such as tithe records for particular regions of Europe, or state tax records kept by some polities, they do not concern wider populations, only individuals who had holdings and thus could potentially pay taxes. Women (except widows), elderly people who lived in someone else's household, servants, apprentices, and children

were all outside the scope of such surveys. Finally, as all of these records served tax purposes in one way or another, many people had no interest in being included in these lists. Those who tried to evade taxes therefore remain invisible until, or even after, the introduction of censuses. Therefore, whenever precise population estimates—of different polities, the death tolls of epidemics, famines, military conflicts, and so on—are presented in the context of early modern times, one must be very cautious with the figures.

That said, major advances in data collection have enabled the creation of databases in which individuals are trackable across time and space, allowing scholars to find the same person again in data from a later census. Another big impetus to the field has come through close collaboration with genealogists, using crowd-sourcing techniques and citizen science projects to record information about past populations.

Early Modern Demographic Regime: Was There a Malthusian Equilibrium in Europe?

The Malthusian model has been very influential in historical studies of population and resources. Malthus's model predicted regular crises, since food production increases at a linear rate whereas population tends to increase exponentially. There is some evidence suggesting that this may hold for the medieval period and for some regions of Europe up until 1800. Malthus was an English minister concerned with what he saw as a recurrent problem: that any increase in food production led to greater population growth, which would subsequently literally eat up any gains in living standards, thus trapping populations at low standards of living and on the edge of subsistence. His analysis identified a series of 'positive' (resulting in higher death rates) and 'preventive' (resulting in lowered birth rates) checks on population growth. These checks might temporarily disrupt the relationship between food production and population growth, but Malthus was generally pessimistic about the long-term potential of populations to overcome this supposedly natural tendency towards growth. The point at which the population outstrips the growth in food production, leading to scarcity, famine, and disease, is referred to as a 'Malthusian catastrophe'.

What we know of the early modern period is that some moments were more Malthusian than others. European populations do indeed seem to have grown faster than food production, and living standards were negatively affected. Owing to the demographic crisis caused by the fourteenth-century Black Death, labour was relatively scarce in the late Middle Ages and at the beginning of the early modern period. This scarcity drove up the wages of both men and women and meant that women tended to marry later and have

fewer children. However, with large-scale change in farming practices and other market developments, the demand for female labour subsided and so, from around 1600 to 1800, women married slightly younger, populations grew more rapidly, and living standards (as measured by real wages) declined.

Between 1000 and 1824, Spain, Britain, and Poland had steadily growing population levels over the early modern period, with substantial increases emerging in the eighteenth century. The population of Britain really took off in the eighteenth century, reflecting a significant increase in birth rates around this time. Poland also experienced a change in the rate of population growth and, across the board, this trend was one of acceleration. This was a time during which the continent stood at the cusp of significant demographic changes, and it is here that we start to see the first signs of the demographic transition to come.

In studies of the demographic transition, France is a famous outlier. There, birth rates and death rates fell in sync with each other, leading to a far smaller 'youth bulge' than one would normally expect to see. This pattern can already be clearly observed over the course of the eighteenth century when French birth rates decline precipitously while those in England and Wales rise. One argument that has been put forward for the very distinct French pattern of demographic development is an early process of secularisation, which lowered expectations around producing large families in service of faith. This brings us to the next section, where fertility is discussed in more detail.

Fertility

Fertility was high in the pre-modern context. In the absence of modern contraception, childbirth occurred frequently – and, in the absence of modern medicine, many women died giving birth. However, there are indications that early modern Europeans (especially those in the west of the continent) did not bear as many children as they could have. The fact that many women from north-western Europe only married at the age of twenty-five and above already limited fertility. The practice of extending the breastfeeding stage and a preference for greater spacing between children limited the number of children born in wedlock. Fertility stood between 4.5 to seven children per woman for much of the early modern period. Given high levels of infant mortality, this level of childbirth might well have left couples with only two to three adult children, a figure at or just above the replacement level for a population. However, certainly for the British case, the end of the early modern period is one of increasing fertility; for France, however, the opposite occurred, and women went from having approximately 4.5 children to having 3.5 children between 1650 and 1800. As discussed above, the French case was exceptional.

With regard to Britain, data from British parish registers indicates that over the early modern period the average gap between births dropped by eight percent from their highest level of 33.27 months over the period between 1640–1660 to 30.54 months between births by the end of the eighteenth century. This means that—on average—women had three fewer months between pregnancies which, over the course of a lifetime, could significantly increase total fertility. Looking beyond the British and French cases, detailed fertility data for other parts of Europe is hard to come by, and, in the context of high maternal mortality, many women did not reach the end of their child-bearing years.



Fig. 1: Jacob Ernst Marcus, 'Study sheet with three old men and a young woman' (1807), Public Domain (CC0 1.0), Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, <https://www.lookandlearn.com/history-images/YR0149274/Study-sheet-with-three-old-men-and-a-young-woman>.

Mortality

Death rates in early modern Europe gradually declined across most of the continent from the high Middle Ages (ca. 1000) onward. However, there were numerous exceptional periods tied to weather events or environmental crises, epidemics, and military conflicts, all of which could result in privation, malnutrition, and famine. Extreme weather during the growing season or during the harvest, the passing of an army, or simply a lack of hands to carry out the necessary preparation of the soil, the sowing, or the harvesting, could cause crises of crop production which, in some cases, could endanger the very survival of a certain group. Crises connected to crop failures recurrently

happened in the medieval period and during the early modern age, often in a localised manner, with particular regions suffering from high mortality rates while others were spared, according to conditions. War in particular affected regions differently: the late medieval and early modern wars of the Ottomans in the Balkans and the Carpathian Basin, the Wars of Religion in France, and the Thirty Years' War in German-speaking areas took a tremendous toll in those parts of Europe involved in the conflict, but other areas did not experience these shocks to mortality. In most cases, economic crises only affected particular polities, and in many cases, these led to the rapid economic development of other, competing regions. While famines were recurrent in much of Europe up to the high Middle Ages, they became much more local phenomena by the late Middle Ages. However, they never fully went away, and continued to strike early modern Europe as a result of military campaigns, extreme weather, plant or animal diseases, or the confluence of multiple factors. Most of these famines were still limited to specific parts of Europe, such as the Russian famine of 1600–1603, the Irish Famine of 1740–1741 or the Great Czech Famine of 1770–1771. The kind of European-scale famines that had occurred in the later Middle Ages and the early modern times became less frequent. The Great Famine of 1315–1317 was probably the only late medieval example of such a famine occurring on a European scale. It was followed in early modern times by food crises and famines from 1590–1598 and from 1693–1697.

Epidemic diseases were also a significant cause of mortality. Smallpox, influenza, measles, syphilis, malaria, and so-called 'sweating sickness' were all present in certain phases of the early modern period, causing serious epidemics in some regions. However, none proved to be as lethal as the plague. The so-called second plague pandemic that began in the mid-fourteenth (or, according to other estimates, the mid-thirteenth) century, and recurred in some areas until as late as the early nineteenth century, was a major factor in mortality throughout early modern Europe. After the wave of Black Death of the 1340s and 1350s, the plague never again caused comparable demographic crises on a Europe-wide scale, but its recurrent spikes did cause regional and local demographic stress. While the plague was long believed to have been a primarily urban phenomenon or one which affected male and female populations differently (further aggravating its demographic impacts), such claims have recently been disproved. While there were obvious differences in the waves of plagues in different parts of Europe—Italy likely suffered more than areas north of the Alps or in Eastern Europe—both urban centres and rural areas, and both male as well as female populations were severely affected for decades.

It is important to note that mortality in general in this period hit children and women hardest. Women died in childbirth or from postpartum bleeding or infections and young children were susceptible to infectious disease.

Conclusion

At the very end of the early modern period, some European countries began to experience demographic transitions. This was a phenomenon whereby a drop in death rates was not immediately followed by a drop in birth rates, leading to a period of rapid population growth followed by a stabilisation at low levels of both birth and death rates. However, the position from which countries started on this process and the speed with which the phenomenon developed varied from region to region. Fertility and mortality were intrinsically tied to developments in standards of living, and many periods of early modern European history are characterised by Malthusian limitations. However, Europeans were also proactive in limiting fertility and started to live longer as incremental advances were made in the science of illness. Moreover, wider societal developments had significant influence on demography with secularisation, colonisation, and proto-industrialisation changing the ways in which populations responded to different situations. This meant that across the continent experiences differed, with some countries experiencing the start of a so-called 'youth bulge' from the later seventeenth century onwards, whereas others maintained stable populations with high birth and death rates.

Discussion questions

1. Describe the differences in demographic change between European countries in the early modern period.
2. What is the 'Malthusian model' and why was it so influential? Is this still a good way to think about demographic change?
3. Can we learn anything for today from early modern demographic developments?

Suggested reading

Alfani, Guido and Cormac Ó Gráda, eds, *Famine in European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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