

Human Empire: Mobility and Demographic Thought in the British Atlantic World, 1500–1800

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Human Empire: Mobility and Demographic Thought in the British Atlantic World, 1500–1800, by Ted McCormick, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, Ideas in Context, 2022, 320pp, £75 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1009123266

In 1795 the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham set aside almost two years to undertake a complete and it should be said abortive reform of the English Poor Laws, amounting in manuscript to over 2400 pages of material, in a project he called the ‘National Charity Company’. According to one historian, the resulting system was

replete with a repressiveness so pervasive, so soul-destroying, and with so little regard for either the civil liberties or the emotional sensitivities of those whose health (moral as well as physical) and happiness it set out to promote and protect, that its administrative progressiveness pales in comparison.¹

Whether well-intentioned or not, Bentham proposed that every movement and every moment of the poorest would be surveyed and constrained, every aspect of their lives transformed, so as to transform them in turn. In 1697, and certainly less well-intentioned, John Locke argued to the English Board of Trade in his *Essay on the Poor Laws* that any idle or shirking male paupers ought to be forcibly transported by constables to port towns and there put to hard service in the Navy if they were suitable, or into workhouses otherwise.² During the War of the Spanish Succession many poor and mobile men were impressed in this fashion, caught ‘living idly at their own hands’.³ In his 1584 *Discourse on Western Planting* Richard Hakluyt argued that England absolutely must colonise so-called empty lands, and urgently, in order expurgate and productively repurpose idle poor people. The English state, he noted,

for all the statutes that hitherto can be devised, and the sharpe execution of the same in punishing idle and lazye persons, for wante of sufficient occasion of honest employment, cannot deliver our commonwealth from multitudes of loyterers and idle vagabondes.⁴

The poor were and are constantly the target of demographic transformation.

Poverty sat at the heart of early modern ideas about populations, how they ought to be delineated and developed, and what ought to be done with and to them. This is true not only before the English Civil Wars, but all the way through the expansive period covered by Ted McCormick’s *Human Empire*. Thomas Malthus’s laws of population growth and scarcity articulated at the end of the eighteenth century – as they applied to humans – were predicated on the assumed behaviours of the poor. It is I think crucial that McCormick’s study of the origins of demographic thought begins with poverty, vagrancy, and rural depopulation in sixteenth century England, though the preoccupation with poverty was a constant across the entire period. The poor of England, Ireland, and of colonised places and spaces were all set out as archetypal ‘recalcitrant human material’ (101), the ‘waste people’ (117) that political arithmetic was designed to transform. Poverty was arguably the first object of ‘population’ in the commonwealth and utopian tracts of Thomas Starkey, Thomas Smith, and Thomas More, all of whom feature in the book’s discussion of the shift from sixteenth-century ‘multitudes’ towards ‘population’ (44). McCormick states plainly and powerfully that

a major point of this book is the importance of what we might think of collectively as marginal groups – the displaced, the impoverished, the criminalized and the colonized – to the formation of ideas about what sort of things populations were. (14)

It is rightly the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for McCormick, in which we encounter policies for population which aimed at ‘widely held ideas of common good’ or ‘boundless improvement’

(21). This important theoretical underpinning tracks neatly, I think, into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

But of course, *Human Empire* is not a book principally concerned with poverty, at least, not explicitly. It is a book in no small measure about what was done to, or thought about, the poor (and other social groups cast as problems) but it could not be a book about what the poor did or thought in response. Instead, the book's aim, very successfully accomplished, is to explain, contextualise, and think systematically about the origins and development of a 'newly ascendant epistemology' (21) that enabled new forms of governance, that is, demographic thought in Britain and the British Atlantic. Nor is *Human Empire* a book about mobility per se, although moving populations around, excitedly planning to move populations around, and speculatively mixing populations all feature distinctly as intellectual currents and as practices of states. Mobile populations also feature as a recurrent bugbear of state structures and governing intellects. It was 'discrete confrontations' with 'mobile multitudes' of vagrants and the Irish which first shaped a way of thinking that, by the end of the eighteenth-century, became utterly commonplace (233). In a book as well-theorised, thorough, and systematic in its thinking as this one, for me 'mobility' stands out as one theme in need of more elaboration. How did early moderns distinguish *demographic* mobilities from other, less appropriate forms? How and in what shapes did demographic thinkers apply the moral calculus which governed mobility in early modern Britain and certainly in the Atlantic world; that pervading sensibility that it must be purposeful, that it must be a means to an end, that it must have geographically and culturally fixed start and end points. When transforming and regulating populations, how central was controlling population mobility to the endeavour? At different places in the study we obtain satisfying if individual answers, but how might the arguments be changed by articulating a systematic role for certain valorised movements in the development of demography?

Because of course mobility was everywhere, praised and banned, despised and needful. We can see the moral calculus governing mobility inscribed in landscapes by turnpike roads and stagecoach networks, through canals, and in transformed fenlands and tamed forests. We can also see the calculus applied across numerous archives of poverty, unsettlement, and exclusion, and in the incessant refrains against itinerancy from pulpits and in print. Is it the circulations of 'mobility' then that the colonial projectors, arithmeticians, and commonwealthmen summoned in their pamphlets and proposals, or was it rather a starker and more specific vision of *displacement* and *replacement*? Ploughmen displaced by enclosing landlords degenerated into vagrants, so this must be prevented (32); Protestant English women could be sent to replace Catholic Irish women as acculturating, englishing, colonising, brides to Irish men (177); perpetual-motion machinery had the potential to both displace and replace the bodies and labours of enslaved Africans in the West Indies, without ending slavery it seems (156); the Foundling Hospital, at last resort, replaced idle and immoral (and poor) parents, subjecting infants to the heavy hand of the philanthropic state in a bid to re-form them at their life's beginning (216).

At the end of the eighteenth century, into the 'baroque edifice' of demographic governance – that *Human Empire* does so much to explore – slams the 'wrecking ball of Malthusian principle' (235). The 'baroque alchemy' of political arithmetic is replaced by the 'liberal logic of political economy'. Except all is not lost and perhaps too much is retained. Malthus was by 1803 rather more in line with his predecessors than several generations of scholarship have assumed. And McCormick is not alone in pushing productively past Malthus's appeal to 'the hard benevolence of "nature's God"' and towards his interventions on the Poor Laws, where he 'tasked government' with intervening just as urgently as everyone else did, albeit in radically differing ways (237, 241).⁵ The ends of Malthusian liberalism were not as far from the aims of more radical Enlightenment thinkers such as William Godwin, much as Malthus protested otherwise. Although certainly no proto-Owenite, he argued more expansively in favour of some forms of education for the poor than did the radical utilitarian Jeremy Bentham. In revised editions of the *Essay*, while discussing 'moral restraint', Malthus makes clear that education was for him a unique advantage to bestow on a population's poorer inhabitants, because 'the raising of one person may actually contribute to the raising of others', unlike the poor laws in his view, and men so educated might be inspired into prideful

employments and restraints of habit and mind which restricted family size.⁶ He certainly seemed unwilling to abandon one of the most fundamental Enlightenment transformations of persons and peoples. Bentham, conversely, argued to French Revolutionary authorities that the state should only fund education ‘as concerns the providing instruction for the poor’ which was ‘considered as part of the provision made in a remote way for protection against malefactors’, in so many words consigning the poor to serving as mere criminals in the making.⁷ All this from the same thinker who admonished France (and by extension Britain too) to ‘Emancipate Your Colonies!’ in 1793 because they were a drain on the fortunes of the poorest.⁸


* * *

Poverty haunts the conclusions of *Human Empire* too. McCormick brings the book to a powerful close with brief discussions of proletarians and biopolitics, and with calls for further study of the classed, racialised, and gendered aspects of an ‘early modern inheritance’ we still live uncomfortably with: the ‘assumption that population – whether manifested in ideological terms as a confessional group, a labor force, a nation or a race – concretized qualities whose control, preservation or alteration was a central task of governance’ (250). In so doing McCormick acknowledges what his book necessarily leaves undone, while commenting on our troubled present. Contemplating our situation today, it appears the distances between humans grow larger, that they become more and dangerously ‘natural’, and that the lines between our belonging and our eviction are drawn ever sharper, their borders policed ever more heavily.

Human Empire is a rare accomplishment: an intellectual history that is a driven, engaging, cogently argued, and meticulous exploration of an entire way of thinking about people, across a huge range of influential thinkers and voices and an intimidatingly long period of historical time. It is a work which nevertheless makes space to reach outward, into the social context of the ideas it so powerfully explores, and it is this attention to the effects and implications of a particular way of thinking, visible in the voluminous footnotes but also powerfully explicit in how this book argues its case, that to me makes it special. It is a book that all fellow early modern historians would do well to engage with, its insights now fit like a puzzle piece into my own understanding of that tumultuous age.

Notes

1. Charles F. Bahmueller, *The National Charity Company: Jeremy Bentham's Silent Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 1.
2. John Locke, ‘An Essay on the Poor Law’, in *Political Essays*, ed. Mark Goldie (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1997), 182–98.
3. David Hitchcock, *Vagrancy in English Culture and Society, 1650–1750* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 32–3.
4. Hakluyt, *Discourse*, 36.
5. E.A. Wrigley and Richard Smith, ‘Malthus and the Poor Law’, *The Historical Journal*, 63, no. 1, ‘Malthusian Moments’ (February 2020), 33–62.
6. Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1798 (Bettany edition 1890), 531.
7. Jeremy Bentham, ‘Short views of the economy for the use of the French Nation’ (1789), No. 29.
8. Jeremy Bentham, *Emancipate Your Colonies! Addressed to the National Convention of France A° 1793, Shewing the Uselessness and Mischievousness of Distant Dependencies to a European State* (London: printed for Robert Heward, 1830), Nos. 15, 20.

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