

IMAG AND THE FUTURE OF COMPARATIVE POPULATION HISTORY

Comparative, transnational and cross-border studies which trace global linkages and international population patterns invigorate the study of history today. Work by Daniel Rodgers, Randy William Widdis, Gérard Bouchard, Peter Kilchin, Edward Said and Immanuel Wallerstein address diverse topics such as international social welfare ties, cross-border immigration and family patterns, cultural expressions of colonialism, and economic world systems such as unfree labour. What ties these scholars together is their interest in social, cultural and political patterns which transcend national boundaries.

Comparative study of population patterns has not fared as well in recent decades. Over thirty years ago, the publication of *Household and Family in Past Time*, edited by Peter Laslett and Richard Wall, signaled European and U.S. interest in defining common household types, emphasizing the homogeneity of the Western family. Rather than leading to further internationally comparative work, this study was followed in the 1970s and 1980s by population histories which focused on communities. The spirit of the Cambridge enterprise was debated as well by demographic historians who emphasized the importance of longitudinal perspectives on the life course, as well as the concept of demographic constraints on family formation, and by feminist historians who criticized perspectives which presumed unity of interest and choice within families. Today, historians such as those engaged in the Canadian Families Project discuss families rather than family, emphasizing their interest in diverse family patterns rather than searching for one common type. Large-scale systematic comparisons of historical population patterns failed to flourish in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, partly through lack of comparable evidence, partly because early computer software and hardware poorly served the technological requirements of such enterprises, and partly because the intellectual developments of this period demanded an evolution of perspective by scholars of global populations.

A new publication, *International Historical Microdata*, launched on August 8 at the 19th International Congress of Historical Sciences, promises to fill some of this methodological gap. More pertinently, its editors, Patt Kelly-Hall, Robert McCaa and Gunnar Thorvaldsen, and authors, members of the International Microdata Access Group (IMAG), hope that this work signals a new intellectual stage for scholars of international populations. *International Historical Microdata* describes and compares extant census microdata from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from around the world. While diverse countries performed regular population counts in the nineteenth-century, databases which capture these censuses and population registers in machine-readable form are available for Argentina, Norway, England, the Netherlands, Denmark, the United States and

Canada alike. An even wider number of countries, from China and Australia to Colombia and Iceland, are represented by databases drawn from twentieth-century census enumerations. *International Historical Microdata* offers standardized descriptions of these data and their availability, the projects which produced them as well as the research opportunities posed by their use. The book includes a chapter by Canadian Families Project member Peter Baskerville which details Canadian census microdata from 1871, 1881, 1901 and 1961 to 1996.

The idea for *International Historical Microdata* was born at the first IMAG workshop hosted by the Institute of Canadian Studies, University of Ottawa, in Ottawa, May, 1999, where many of the papers included in this book were presented. IMAG was formed to foster the international collaboration of interdisciplinary researchers who work with individual-level electronic census data in order to facilitate transnational comparative research. The mission of IMAG seeks to integrate census microdata across national boundaries by unting multiple data files with a common set of comparably coded variables. *International Historical Microdata* represents IMAG's dedication to facilitate the dissemination of information about historical and contemporary census microdata, as well as encourage consideration of issues pertinent to the integration of these microdata.

The membership of IMAG is drawn from historical census projects and institutions from Europe, Scandinavia, and South and North America. Member projects and institutions include: the Norwegian Historical Data Centre, University of Tromsø; the Demographic Data Base, Umeå University; the Danish Data Archive; l'Institut national d'études démographiques (INED); United Nations Population Activities Unit for Europe and South America; the Department of History and the Data Archive, University of Essex; the Great Britain Historical Geography Project, University of Portsmouth; the Minnesota Historical Census Projects, University of Minnesota; the Center for Social and Economic Policy, University of California-Riverside; the Canadian Families Project; the Institute of Canadian Studies, University of Ottawa; and the Latin American Social Sciences Faculty Program in Demography, National University of Mexico. IMAG ultimately aims to include participants from every continent. IMAG has met at each conference of the Social Science History Association and European Social Science History Association, as well as the International Congress of Historical Sciences, since its initial formation in October, 1998. Further meetings and workshops, including one this fall at the Social Science History conference in Pittsburgh, October 26-29, are listed on its website at: <http://www.uottawa.ca/academic/arts/cdn/imag>.

When possible, scholars from IMAG meet in smaller groups to work together on pilot projects. For example, the Triangle Project is a collaboration of historians from the Canadian Families Project, Institute of Canadian Studies, Minnesota Historical Census Projects and the Department of History, University of Essex, to standardize 100% samples of the 1880/1 census of Canada, the U.S. and England, Wales and Scotland. These databases were originally created by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who have turned to academic historians in an innovative partnership to prepare the files for both academic and genealogical research. The Triangle Project met in June, 2000, at a special workshop hosted by the Minnesota Historical Census Projects (see <http://www.uottawa.ca/academic/arts/cdn/imag/1881.htm>). This fall, Lisa Dillon at the Institute of Canadian Studies is leading the first stage in the Canadian part of this project to produce a useable 1881 Canadian census file which will then become freely available for all interested researchers. This project is offering a valuable education in both social history and research methodologies for five student researchers in the Ottawa area. The 100% sample of the 1881 Census of Canada, which covers the entire enumerated Canadian population of 4.3 million residents, has the potential to become one of our most important resources for the study of economic and social organization during Canada's formative period. For instance, there are well over 50,000 individuals in this database recorded as "Indian" or "Sauvage." More importantly, when integrated with comparable data from the United States and England, Wales and Scotland from 1880/1, this database will offer an exceptional opportunity to conduct international comparative research on North Atlantic populations.

The methodological opportunity posed by these data as well as the co-operative enterprise of IMAG must not obscure the intellectual doors which now stand open before us. Social

historians who engage in internationally comparative population research stand to benefit from historical discussions of the past thirty years by conducting this research in new ways. Inspired by the scholarship of Bruce Curtis, Benedict Anderson and Mary Poovey, we can study administrative documents such as enumerator instructions and the data themselves to understand what these words and numbers tell us about the representation and identities of families and polities, women and men, workers and housekeepers, children and the elderly, and how those representations varied across borders. We can draw upon feminist and Marxist theory to explore gender- and class-based inequalities within and among families and social groups. Furthermore, IMAG provides a valuable forum for researchers to discuss similarities and differences in their approaches to and use of these microdata. Like the routinely-generated historical documents upon which they are based, census microdata are constructed bodies of information and inevitably reflect the priorities and assumptions of their creators. Only through the international dialogue fostered by organizations such as IMAG can database creators and users begin to understand and consider modifying these priorities and assumptions. Finally, the long-term historical and trans-national research based on this international research data infrastructure will provide a crucial baseline for understanding the dynamics of poverty, race relations, sex discrimination, migration and aging, all issues which continue to affect world populations.

We encourage scholars interested in these census microdata and in joining IMAG to visit the IMAG website for further information.

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