
Reflections on Local Population Studies and Social Science History

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Abstract

This personal reflection of more than 40 years' work on the supply of labour in a household context discusses the relationship between social science history (the application to historical phenomena of the tools developed by social scientists) and local population studies. The paper concludes that historians working on local source materials can give something new back to social scientists and social science historians, urging them to remake their tools.

Introduction

Local Population Studies (LPS) was launched in 1968 to provide historians working on population and social structure in a local context with a 'link' to the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure.¹ Around 1970 the term 'social science history' was still new to many historians. It referred to an approach influenced by the methodology of the *Annales* school founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre and also of United States historians such as Neil Smelser and William Aydelotte. For this particular kind of historical research, the advocates argued that social science concepts, theoretical models constructed on the basis of those concepts, and both quantitative methods and techniques would be useful. Two years before the launching of *LPS*, Keith Thomas published an article in the *Times Literary Supplement*.² It was probably one of the very first in the United Kingdom which drew attention to the beneficial impact methodological 'tools' developed by social scientists would have on the historian's 'job'. What Thomas wanted to promote was the reconstruction—made possible by the employment of such concepts and methods—of the past social structure or cultural system. His survey of exemplary works in social science history (although this term was not used in the *Times Literary Supplement* article) included the name of the new Cambridge Group which was established by Peter Laslett and Tony Wrigley only two years before the publication of the article.

The Cambridge Group is known for the research projects which resulted in the landmark publications: *Household and Family in Past Time*, *The Population History of England* and

1 Editors, 'Intentions', *Local Population Studies*, 1 (1968), p. 3.

2 K. Thomas, 'The tools and the job', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966, pp. 275–6; another influential publication for the UK history circles was P. Burke, *Economy and Society in Early Modern Europe: Essays from Annales* (London, 1972). Note that in the 1960s and 1970s, the *Annales* school was far more oriented towards quantitative research than in later decades.

English Population History from Family Reconstitution.³ Today, the Group covers far wider research areas, including historical studies of welfare systems, under the leadership of Richard Smith, and the reconstruction of occupational structure in the past. The British occupational project was launched in 2003 by Wrigley and Leigh Shaw-Taylor as the Group's new long-term project, covering a period from the fourteenth century to 1911, with subsidiary projects set up more recently. The latter are international and comparative.⁴ Thus, now, occupational structure occupies a central place in the Group's research programme.

The Cambridge Group's past projects were innovative. In particular, the three landmark publications listed above made 'discipline-transforming' contributions to social science history and what they transformed was a *national* picture that historians had assumed. So, why did the Group want to keep close ties with local historians? How was the Group's 'large and technical' kind of social science history research related to the kind of historical *local* population studies *LPS* has promoted?

Obviously, data collection is crucial for any 'large and technical' research. In fact, the Cambridge Group benefited hugely from the information local historians supplied about local listings of inhabitants for household and family studies, on the one hand, and parish registers of marriage, baptism and burial for demography, on the other. Another reason is that, as we all know, it is always advisable to conduct one or two pilot studies before setting on a larger or national sample. It should be remembered that the Group's principal researchers had tried out their ideas and methodologies as case studies. Laslett had published a paper on the basis of listings of inhabitants in the villages of Clayworth and Cogenhoe, Nottinghamshire, before the Group was formed.⁵ Wrigley set out fertility and mortality estimates derived from family reconstitution studies of one parish, Colyton, Devon, in the very early stages of the Group's research.⁶ In the first issue of the journal, they made their position clear: '[w]e believe that local studies are vital to a proper understanding of the relationship between population and social and economic history'.⁷

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- 3 P. Laslett and R. Wall (eds), *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge, 1972); E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871: a Reconstruction* (London, 1981); and E.A. Wrigley, R.S. Davies, J.E. Oeppen and R.S. Schofield, *English Population History from Family Reconstitution, 1580–1837* (Cambridge, 1997).
 - 4 One is a book project known as INCHOS (acronym of the International Network for the Comparative History of Occupational Structure) organised by Leigh Shaw-Taylor and myself. Others are continent-specific: AFCHOS (African), ENCHPOPGOS (European, focusing on both population geography and occupational structure), and LACHOS (Latin American). For more on these comparative projects, see the Cambridge Group's webpage: https://www.campop.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/international_occupations/ [accessed 25 May 2018].
 - 5 P. Laslett and J. Harrison, 'Clayworth and Cogenhoe', in H.E. Bell and R.L. Ollard, (eds), *Historical Essays 1660–1750: Presented to David Ogg* (London, 1963), pp. 157–84; reprinted in P. Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations: Essays in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 50–102.
 - 6 E.A. Wrigley, 'Family limitation in pre-industrial England', *Economic History Review*, 19 (1966), pp. 82–109; 'Mortality in pre-industrial England: the example of Colyton, Devon, over three centuries', *Daedalus*, 97 (1968), pp. 546–80.
 - 7 P. Laslett, R. S. Schofield and E.A. Wrigley, 'CAMPOP and LPS', *Local Population Studies*, 1 (1968), p. 4.

This is an important point, but it seems to me that there are some further important methodological aspects to this relationship between local case studies and national-level or higher-level generalisations. In this essay, therefore, I would like to dwell on this question, largely on the basis of my own personal recollections.

The 1970s

I was fortunate to be able to spend a little more than two years from 1976 at the Cambridge Group, undertaking research on the supply of labour in a household context in eighteenth and early nineteenth century England. I arrived at the Group with a fairly well articulated idea about the research I wanted to conduct. The idea came from labour economics and was concerned with the concept of labour force participation or labour supply. What I wanted to explore was men's and women's labour supply behaviour in the household and family context. The underlying idea was that the probability of taking employment must have varied according to an individual's age, sex, marital status, and his or her position in the household, which actually meant drawing age-sex patterns of participation in the labour force for a specific community in the past. What I expected to find was that, while people's labour supply behaviour remained stable over time, the level and pattern of their age-sex patterns shifted sensitively to changes in circumstances.

Research of that kind requires data which allow us to break down occupational information by age, sex, marital status, and the position in the household. For the period before the second half of the nineteenth century, it meant that we ought to look for individual-level data. As for my own country, with a little bit of research experience in Japanese economic and social history, I had already had a rough idea about what to expect in a peasant society such as Tokugawa Japan. In that society of family farms, everybody worked; as a result, the age-specific profile of females' labour force participation rate was almost identical with that for males: the rate was close to 100 per cent throughout the working age groups. It is for wage work or non-farm by-employment that women's profile began to respond to differences in age and marital status, although it was difficult to substantiate this based solely on published government statistics.⁸ I thus turned my attention to a society radically different from Tokugawa Japan, in terms of the structure of both family and society. Eighteenth century England was my target.

For nineteenth century Britain, I knew that there were census enumerators' books open to everybody, but I was not quite sure what sort of resources were available for earlier centuries. The only promising information I found was about materials used in the chapter by Laslett in *Household and Family in Past Time*. The materials are listings of inhabitants, drawn up by various people for various reasons and for various communities in earlier times. The aim of Laslett's research was to establish, on the basis of a sample of one

⁸ After my return to Tokyo, I made a search for individual-level data and found duplicates of original returns of a pilot census conducted in 1879 for four villages in a province west of Tokyo. The tabulations from the micro-data confirmed my suppositions.

hundred English communities, a time trend in mean household size since the late sixteenth century, but in the article a number of tabulations were made and a few of them were cross-tabulated with social class. The occupational categories they adopted to group households was very English: ‘gentlemen’, ‘clergy’, ‘yeomen’, ‘husbandmen’, ‘tradesmen and craftsmen’, ‘labourers’, ‘paupers’ and ‘others’. I thus went to the Group with a piece of knowledge that there were at least one hundred parishes for which information was available as far as the occupational status of the household head was concerned. When I first met Peter Laslett in his room at 27 Trumpington Street, my research proposal got an immediate endorsement from him. What I had expected was his guidance and orientation for a complete beginner in early modern English history. However, what Peter actually said was ‘Just do it. We never thought of it in that way’. Thus, without any preparatory course my English project took off. During this rather unusual journey, it was Richard Wall who guided me through; he was very helpful.

The first task was to find individual-level data which allowed me to break down occupational information by age, sex, and marital status for everybody in the household. I went to the Cambridge Group library to go over all the listings the Group had collected. There were about 500. Out of this number, I found two listings, Cardington and Corfe Castle, which looked very promising. For Cardington, Bedfordshire, the survey was taken in 1782 and for Corfe Castle, Dorset, in 1790. While the Dorset parish was located in heathland close to the south coast, the Bedfordshire village was situated in the arable vale of the river Great Ouse. Despite this difference, however, both were proto-industrial: Corfe Castle had employment in spinning and knitting and Cardington in spinning and lace making. Both parishes were poor in the sense that their poor relief expenditures per head were higher than the national average. Against this background, men’s and women’s age patterns of labour force participation were drawn up with further breakdowns. After the first round of work, I had a choice between going interdisciplinary or intertemporal. The first option meant to do family reconstitutions in order to include demographic variables into the framework, but it was not possible for purely practical reasons. I therefore went for intertemporal comparisons with the 1851 census data for the two parishes. Having finished this second round, the results of the analysis were published in *Local Population Studies*.⁹

The profiles of labour force participation I drew up for both Cardington and Corfe Castle in the two time periods turned out to be rather unexpected ones. Given the contrast between fully engaged peasant and wage-earning patterns, I had expected that the profiles for English populations in the past would have been more or less closer to twin-peaked, M-shaped ones with the first peak coming before marriage and the second after child rearing. However, the age pattern of Cardington women in the late eighteenth century was not like

9 O. Saito, ‘Who worked when: life-time profiles of labour force participation in Cardington and Corfe Castle in the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries’, *Local Population Studies*, 22 (1979), pp. 14–29 (reprinted in D. Mills and K. Schürer (eds), *Local Communities in the Victorian Census Enumerators’ Books* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 184–99; and N. Goose (ed.), *Women’s Work in Industrial England: Regional and Local Perspectives* (Hatfield, 2007), pp. 209–27.

that. The vast majority of the women in the 25–50 year age group were in the labour force, similar to the men's age pattern. Although after the peak of about 90 per cent for 25–29 year olds the participation rate declined as age advanced, the decline was so gradual that more than half of women in the 50 years and over age group still remained in employment. The Corfe Castle women's participation rate in 1790 was not M-shaped either. For them, the decline in the level started a little earlier and was steeper than that of their Cardington counterparts, but the trough of the curve did not correspond to their average age at marriage, suggesting that a substantial number of young mothers did not withdraw from the labour market. Two forces were at work in both parishes: cottage industry and poverty. The former provided job opportunities while poverty represented the necessity factor and, apparently, it was women having small children who were in a marginal position in the sense that necessity outweighed opportunity in their decision-making. Sixty-nine years later the same set of forces was still operating in Cardington (although the peak level of labour force participation was a little lower than before), with lace-making remaining the chief employment of women workers. In contrast, circumstances changed greatly in Corfe Castle between 1790 and 1851. The age curve shifted down. Since the trough was still found among those in their thirties, it seems that poverty was still serious for young married women, but job opportunities for women of any age had declined markedly by the mid nineteenth century.

Both listings allowed me to break down the sample by marital status and age of children. A tabular analysis revealed that, given the propensity of boys over 15 to enter the job market whatever the circumstances, it was girls in the same age group who tended to take up employment 'in response to the family's needs', and that their mothers joined the labour market only when 'the family income had to be supplemented even though the daughters had already begun to earn', suggesting that mothers were in a marginal position with respect to the household labour supply.¹⁰ I dwelt on this economic question. My working hypothesis was that the impact of poverty outweighed that of opportunity in the period in question, but to test this information about wage earnings was needed. The Corfe Castle data gave me such information but the Cardington listing did not. I therefore decided to do supplementary work with both micro-level and aggregate-level data. For the former, I combined family budgets taken from Frederick Morton Eden's *State of the Poor* (1797) with the Corfe Castle data, together with information about expected female wage rates supplemented by Arthur Young's *A Six Months' Tour through the North of England* (1771) and David Davies's book *The Case of Labourers in Husbandry Stated and Considered* (1795).¹¹ For the latter I undertook comparable analyses for the mid nineteenth century, though with data aggregated at county levels. The two exercises reached the same conclusion: a difference in

10 Saito, 'Who worked when', pp. 26–7.

11 F.M. Eden, *The State of the Poor: or, an History of the Labouring Classes in England, from the Conquest to the Present Period*, 2 vols. (London, 1797); A. Young, *A Six Months' Tour through the North of England, Containing an Account of the Present State of Agriculture, Manufactures and Population, in Several Counties of this Kingdom* (London, 1771); D. Davies, *The Case of Labourers in Husbandry Stated and Considered* (London, 1795).

household income measure by the household head's wage earnings exerted a larger impact on the level of women's and children's labour force participation than an increase in wages offered to them. The results of both investigations were published elsewhere.¹²

I was pleased with all this. However, in retrospect, I have come to realise that I failed to address one important question. Cardington and Corfe Castle in the period from the late eighteenth to the mid nineteenth centuries represented the two contrasting trajectories the English local economies experienced during the industrial revolution period. What mattered here was structural change. I knew that the opportunity factor was represented by two separate variables, and that the fate of the labouring poor had more to do with the availability of a particular kind of job opportunity than with a short-term change in the market wage rate. But I did not make any effort to link the former question of structural change to the latter issue of mechanisms in operation at the level of individual behaviour. I now think that I should have identified this larger historical question more explicitly in my published papers.

The 2010s

This hindsight has something to do with my involvement in the International Network for the Comparative History of Occupational Structure (INCHOS), the project I am currently working on with Leigh Shaw-Taylor of the Cambridge Group. Although the funding started in 2003, the Group's occupational project has a much longer history. During my period in Cambridge, Wrigley published a short piece in *LPS* about changes in occupational structure.¹³ His question was to what extent parish registers were usable as a source of occupational information, and he tried that idea out with materials from Colyton, the parish for which the first family reconstitution was carried out. Having identified key topics in economic and demographic history as the proportion of the workforce outside agriculture, proto-industrialisation, and the interaction between the structural change in the workforce and population growth, he ended the *LPS* article with the following note:

the sources upon which any significant advance upon existing knowledge depends are local sources, laborious to exploit and subject to the problem of establishing which amongst the patterns of change found locally are mirrored elsewhere and which are purely local. The sum of many local studies, therefore, is much greater than the constituent parts, especially if the local studies are carried out on a uniform basis. Number alone, for example, does not ensure representativeness. But the possibility of a major advance in understanding the course and nature of change in early modern England exists, if full use of it is

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- 12 O. Saito, 'Labour supply behaviour of the poor in the English industrial revolution', *Journal of European Economic History*, 10 (1981), pp. 633–52; O. Saito, 'Occupational structure, wages, and age patterns of female labour force participation in England and Wales in the nineteenth century', *Keio Economic Studies*, 16 (1979), pp. 17–29.
- 13 E.A. Wrigley, 'The changing occupational structure of Colyton over two centuries', *Local Population Studies*, 18 (1977), pp. 9–21.

made of the care taken by some incumbents to add details about occupation to the bare record of name and date when making entries in their parish registers.¹⁴

It was a plea for a systematic study of local materials. Since then, Wrigley became convinced that the collection of parish register information about occupations would unmistakably enhance the understanding of the course and nature of sectoral change in the English labour force, which in turn led him to the adoption of a scheme of classifying occupations now called the PST (primary, secondary and tertiary) system, distinctly away from the traditional scheme of gentlemen, husbandmen, tradesmen and craftsmen, labourers, and paupers. Behind this classificatory system, therefore, lies his historical-theoretical vision:

[t]he composition of the labour force changed because of the differing income elasticity of demand for primary, secondary, and tertiary products. The income elasticity of demand for the three categories of product differs, being lowest for primary and highest for tertiary products. As the average level of real incomes rise, therefore, the proportion of aggregate demand devoted to the products of primary industry falls, while that for the products of secondary and tertiary industry rises, but in aggregate more rapidly for tertiary than for secondary products. The proportion of the average family's income spent on food declines if its income rises, balanced by a rise in the proportions spent on manufactured products and services of all kinds. As a result, labour force composition adjusts to reflect changes in the proportion of aggregate income spent on the products of primary, secondary, and tertiary industry.¹⁵

This formulation about the changing composition of the labour force, derived from what economists call Engel's law of consumption demand, mirrors what Sir William Petty postulated in his seventeenth-century publication, *Political Arithmetick*, and reformulated two and a half centuries later by Colin Clark as 'Petty's law'.¹⁶ However, the Group's project on the evolution of English occupational structure has not replicated this postulated sequential pattern of sectoral change.¹⁷ Precisely speaking, it generally fits the sequential pattern of *output* composition, but not that of the composition of the *labour force*. During the English industrial revolution, the secondary sector's share in total output did increase, but the share of secondary employment hardly changed; it was tertiary employment that increased its sectoral share in the labour force.¹⁸ In many other countries, on the other

14 Wrigley, 'Changing occupational structure', p. 21.

15 E. A. Wrigley, 'The PST system of classifying occupations', *mimeo*, 9, available at: www.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/occupations/abstracts/ [accessed 26 June 2018]. See also O. Saito and L. Shaw-Taylor, 'The PSTI occupational coding scheme' and other chapters in Part One of the forthcoming INCHOS book: O. Saito and L. Shaw-Taylor (eds), *Occupational Structure, Industrialisation and Economic Growth in a Comparative Perspective* (forthcoming).

16 W. Petty, *Political Arithmetick* (London, 1690); C. Clark, *The Conditions of Economic Progress*, 2nd edn (London, 1951).

17 Neither have many of the country-specific INCHOS studies.

hand, the tertiary sector's share in the labour force was already high before the onset of modern economic growth.

Clearly, we need to know more about what was taking place within the secondary sector, and what kinds of linkage existed between manufacturing and non-manufacturing branches, such as transport and commerce, in the course of industrialisation. The first of the above questions is concerned with the impact of labour-saving machinery introduced during the industrial revolution. Because of this, undoubtedly, there were industries where the demand for labour did not increase despite a strong demand for their products. The cotton trade is a case in point: in spinning and weaving many hand-spinners and handloom weavers must have become redundant with the coming of machinery. However, there were also secondary-sector branches where hand technology remained in use: tailoring, woodworking, building and construction (to name but a few); and even in textiles there were cases, such as pillow lace making, where the production remained in the hands of rural out-workers.¹⁹ As the aggregate demand for manufactured consumer goods increased, it is likely that the demand for labour expanded in the labour intensive finishing processes of manufacturing. This certainly accounts for the observed contrast in the pattern of change in the age profile of female labour force participation between lace-producing Cardington and de-industrialised Corfe Castle. Moreover, there is another compositional question about the service sector. Two kinds of services ought to be distinguished: personal services and those for producers. While the demand for the former increases as the level of household income rises, the demand for the latter grows as the aggregate level of production advances; and the more goods are produced the more jobs will be created to transport them from producers to dealers and, then, from dealers to sellers. Since these trades, commerce and transport, were comparatively labour intensive at the time of the industrial revolution, it is not surprising to find the service sector expanding at a similar, or even higher rate, than the factory sector in manufacturing industry.

Not surprisingly, these balances and compositions changed over time as well as across countries and regions of the world.²⁰

Concluding remarks

The topic of this essay has been the relationships between local historical studies and social science history. Keith Thomas's message in his 1966 article was: '[g]ive us the tools, and we will finish the job'. The tools are supplied from social sciences, derived either from accounting criteria (like national accounting or formal demography as in the case of the

18 For provisional estimates of the sectoral shares of the English labour force and their implications, see L. Shaw-Taylor and E.A. Wrigley, 'Occupational structure and population change', in R. Floud and P. Johnson (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 53–88.

19 See for example R. Samuel, 'The workshop of the world: steam power and hand technology in mid-Victorian Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, 3 (1977), pp. 6–72.

20 These issues will be explored in thematic chapters of Saito and Shaw-Taylor), *Occupational Structure, Industrialisation and Economic Growth*.

Cambridge Group), or from micro-level analysis of human behaviour (like cost-benefit analysis in economics). My research at the Group in the 1970s tilted towards the latter, focusing on the necessity and opportunity framework for the study of people's work behaviour in the past.

In contrast, the current project I am conducting with Leigh Shaw-Taylor has taught me how important macro-level structural change is for local historical research. Identifying a structural change is part of the reconstruction of past society agenda, which Wrigley and Schofield's book *The Population History of England* did marvellously (in fact, the book's subtitle is '*a Reconstruction*'). It provides us with a context within which individual events and short-term changes should be studied, thus enabling us to produce a fresh narrative for a specific case study. But, more importantly, the identified long-term structural change itself ought to be considered an *explicandum* (something to be explained). A new interpretation and explanation will in turn lead to a revision of the existing conceptual framework or model in the corresponding social science. Wrigley and Schofield's *Population History of England* certainly questioned demographers' Malthusian interpretations of pre-transition demography. Similarly, the occupational structure project's new findings will urge economists and economic historians to reformulate Clark's interpretations of Petty's law. In other words, historians working on local source materials can give something new back to social scientists and social science historians, urging them to remake their tools. What really matters is such two-way traffic.

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