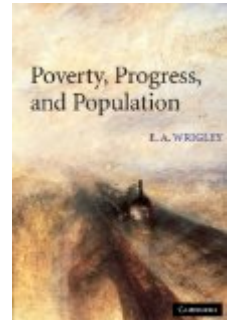


E. A. Wrigley. *Poverty, Progress and Population*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xiv + 463 pp. \$33.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-52974-7.



Reviewed by Paul S. Warde

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This new volume from Tony Wrigley, collecting thirteen previously published essays and two entirely new pieces, is in many ways a follow-up to his earlier collection, *People, Cities and Wealth: The Transformation of Traditional Society*, published in 1987. The volume takes on the same format of bringing together his extensive output over the previous two decades and, indeed, could easily have enjoyed the same title. Taken together, and even taken independently of Wrigley's major contributions to the field of economic history and historical demography that appeared as discrete books or in collaboration with colleagues at the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, these two volumes of collected works present the immense and wide-ranging contribution to economic history that the author has made over a long and productive career. Much of what is collected together in *Poverty, Progress and Population*, perhaps inevitably, represents clarifications or developments on already established themes, and in this regard the sum of the work is perhaps not so groundbreaking as those essays to be found in the 1987 publication. Nevertheless, the essays present a conveniently

gathered record of one of the most influential figures in British economic history of recent decades, and display a characteristic and exemplary combination of conceptual lucidity and methodological care.

The book's fifteen chapters are marshaled into three sections, prefaced with a short introduction. The three parts roughly correspond to the three primary strands of Wrigley's work in the past four decades, and will be familiar to those acquainted with his output. The first, "The Wellsprings of Growth," covers eight chapters devoted to the conceptualization of key issues of economic development, especially the spectacular economic success of Britain that is increasingly dated, in no small part thanks to Wrigley's own earlier work, to a long period covering the latter part of the seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century rather than a short late-eighteenth-century spurt. The second and much shorter section, "Town and Country," comprising three chapters, gathers work that is basically similar to that in "The Wellsprings of Growth," but that focuses more specifically on the stimulus to devel-

opment provided by the concentration of economic activity in market centers and the reconfiguration of their hinterlands, a theme famously highlighted by the author in early work on the importance of London in England's economic development. The final section, "The Numbers Game," contains four chapters detailing Wrigley's demographic thinking subsequent to the two monumental volumes that arose from his work in the Cambridge Group; to a large degree these chapters contain measured but detailed responses to criticisms of those works.

The thesis of the early chapters on the nature of early modern economic development in Europe, and more particularly England, will be familiar to readers of Wrigley's *Continuity, Chance and Change*, published in 1988. England's "pre industrial" precocity (though still, for most of the period, trailing behind the relatively more prosperous economy of the Netherlands) is attributed to its successful institutional structure, transport infrastructure, and the unusually focused development of the national market around London. In short, this type of growth, that Wrigley attributes to one "kind of capitalism" that might be called "Smithian" by many current economists, is what made for English exceptionalism before the early nineteenth century. Organizational advantages permitted the British to become the most effective exploiters of organic resources in the "advanced organic economy." In contrast, a second kind of capitalism ushered in what has been traditionally conceptualized as the Industrial Revolution: new technologies capable of harnessing the enormous boost to energy availability granted by the exploitation of coal. The distinction between these two forms of growth has been Wrigley's way of retaining the analytical promise of the concept of Industrial Revolution, while accommodating more recent growth estimates that query the idea of a sudden take off in the late eighteenth century. Indeed, in distinction to traditional attitudes on this question, Wrigley speculates that only the first form of capitalism could sustain English ex-

ceptionalism for any length of time. As soon as industrial development was predicated upon rapidly diffused coal burning technology, a convergence in the development of economies harnessing those technologies was almost inevitable. The role of empire receives notably little space, in contrast to the currently fashionable emphasis of many economic historians on global history. Those familiar with this thesis might find the opening chapters of the volume a little repetitive and in need of editing; the pithy and succinct repetition of Wrigley's longstanding basic arguments in slightly different contexts may, on the other hand, prove helpful to the unacquainted.

It will be obvious already that Wrigley owes a great and explicit debt to the writings of the classical economists, above all Smith and Malthus. If much of the first few chapters builds on Smith and the economy he analyzed, noting his concern *avant la lettre* about the likelihood of diminishing returns and an eventual stationary state, the final three chapters turn primarily to Malthus, whose works Wrigley previously has edited. Here he gives a rather more nuanced view of the clergyman than that widely held, demonstrating how Malthus grappled with the problem of limits in a traditional economy, and how, "because he was so determined not to be trapped into a deductive exposition of any topic at the cost of suppressing its richness and complexity" (p. 242) (an observation that would surprise those only familiar with Malthus's earliest work), Malthus's writings can sustain a number of different interpretations. More generally, Wrigley's argument in these chapters is that economists as late as Mill were generally pessimistic about the prospects of long term growth and the inevitability of poverty once the limits of specialization in an "advanced organic economy" were reached. Wrigley implies equally that, under the conditions of the "organic economy," they had a point; only the fossil fuel-based Industrial Revolution was capable of overcoming this impasse.

Sandwiched between the chapters of part 1, which is devoted to more general expositions of the nature of growth and reflections on Malthus, are two chapters—one new—that sit somewhat uneasily among papers designed as short speculative or reflective pieces and lectures. These two chapters focus on the occupational structure of England, and are so situated because their logic would have them following on from the more "Smithian" section of the book. If, the logic runs, a fundamental constraint of a traditional peasant economy is that the necessities of life are produced within the household, or at least within the settlement, then there is little scope for the development of trade and the division of labor, which in turn would generate greater efficiencies and economic growth. Equally, the development of urban centers and occupational specialization must indicate a more productive and efficient economy, unless that urbanization is largely a result of rent seeking by political elites, an issue previously addressed in the volume *Towns in Societies: Essays in Economic History and Historical Sociology*, edited by Wrigley and Philip Abrams in 1978. It is well known that England and Wales had an unusually small proportion of their male population active in agriculture by the early nineteenth century, and the thesis that occupational structure represents an isomorph of economic development undergirds a major project on occupational structure being undertaken by Wrigley and Leigh Shaw Taylor. Here, chapter 5, "The Occupational Structure of England in the Mid Nineteenth Century," presents only preliminary findings, but it also represents a methodological *tour de force* in the handling of sources even so familiar as the censuses. Special attention is given to the value of disaggregating census data at the county level and noting both regional trends and patterns that elude the observer of only the aggregated national data. By organizing the results according to the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors, Wrigley is able to highlight the relative stagnation of primary sector employment (with a male agricultur-

al labor force that peaked as early as 1831), and the importance to England of its "nation of shopkeepers," or the persistent growth of the tertiary sector. The regional character of English development may be familiar, but the observation that outside of the West Riding and Lancashire, only 6 percent of adult males were engaged in manufacturing in 1831, is a striking datum on this point. These findings stand only as an anchor point to an endeavor that will seek to project occupational history back across the eighteenth century, but are essential reading for anyone who wishes to grapple with the question of how the mid-nineteenth-century economy was structured, and what kind of restructuring it was undergoing. The weight of methodological detail, including two fairly extended appendices, may make them less attractive to the reader enthralled by the succinct presentations of Wrigley's conceptual apparatus in the chapters on either side.

The four chapters on population usefully gather three previously published pieces and a novel "demographic retrospective" that surveys comparatively the success and corresponding results of various methods employed by Wrigley in his long career as a historical demographer. One chapter reprints his observation that the fall in neonatal mortality may also indicate a rapid decline in stillbirths during the eighteenth century, suggestively blurring the line between "fertility"- and "mortality"-orientated interpretations of population change. Given that the most likely explanation for such a shift would be improved nutrition, this argument represents a challenge that historians of agriculture and living standards have yet to take up. One will also find a reprint of Wrigley's measured but devastating critique of Razzell's arguments that the demographic histories of the Cambridge Group systematically misconstrued national population trends by sampling an unrepresentative section of the population due to marital-related migration. Finally, the "retrospective" compares data from back projection, family reconstitutions, life tables, modeling of

counterfactual hypotheses, censuses, and civil registration to conclude (pleasingly for the author!) that the earlier Cambridge Group histories have got it right. A wealth of perspectives are elegantly and convincingly handled. And, indeed, this is a comment that might be expanded to the entire book: a volume that contains effective and manageable introductions to Wrigley's thinking, tight and detailed methodological pieces on particular issues in economic history and demography, and elegant historiographical surveys. Some might feel the finding, all gathered under the same roof, presents something of a unsatisfying *mélange*, and those who would wish to argue for the centrality of empire and changed cultural habits to economic change in Britain will find little to stimulate them here. What the volume does present is both a retrospective and a hint of future directions from nearly two decades of work by one of Britain's most influential historians.

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