Population Statistics

HOW SOCIAL SCIENTISTS ESTIMATE POPULATION STATISTICS

The Lack of Statistics

Nobody knows the total population of the world between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. Statisticians working from the conflicting, sparse, and uncertain figures offered by historians cannot agree. It would seem at first glance as if nothing could be constructed on such doubtful foundations. It is none-the-less worth trying.

The figures are few and not very reliable. They apply only to Europe and, as a consequence of some admirable research, to China. In these two cases, we have censuses and estimates that are almost valid. The ground may not be very solid, but it is reasonably safe to venture on to it . . .

Angel Rosenblat favors regressive estimation. He starts from present-day figures and calculates backwards. For the whole of the Americas just after the Conquest, this approach produces a very low figure: between ten and fifteen million people. And this would have dropped still further to eight million in the seventeenth century, not increasing again until the beginning of the eighteenth century, and then only slowly.

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How To Calculate?

The example of America shows how simple (even oversimple) methods can be applied to certain relatively reliable figures to arrive at others. Historians, accustomed to accept only things proven by irrefutable documentation, quite justifiably find these uncertain methods disturbing. Statisticians share neither their misgivings nor their timidity. 'We may be criticized for not dealing in minutiae,' says a sociological statistician, Paul A. Ladame; 'we would reply that details are not important: the order of magnitude alone is interesting.' The order of magnitude: that is the probable upper and lower limits.

In this debate where both sides are right (or both wrong) we will take a look at the position from the calculators' point of view. Their method always assumes that there are ratios between the various populations of the globe which, if not fixed, are at least very slow to change. In other words, the population of the world has almost unvarying *structures* so that the numerical relationships between the different human groups are, roughly speaking, always the same. The problem is always the same: starting from known figures and reckoning on a basis of probable proportions, to calculate probable, more comprehensive figures that will determine an *order of magnitude*. The range thus deduced will obviously never be entirely valueless as long as its limitations are recognized. Real figures would be better, but they do not exist.