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Marc Debuisson, *Régimes démographiques et structures socio-économiques: Les communautés villageoises de la province de Namur durant la première moitié du 19e siècle*. Bern: Peter Lang SA. Editions scientifiques internationales, 2015. xxii + 746 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, and bibliography. 129€ (cl). ISBN 978-3-0343-1671-2.

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Marc Debuisson's monumental study of the province of Namur in the nineteenth century seeks to understand the relationships between village-level systems of production and reproduction. It reflects the influence of the classic French school of historical demography and hearkens back to an older age of Annales School regional histories that explored the fundamental importance of subsistence systems in shaping demographic behavior. Debuisson's study differs from many earlier studies, however, by evoking village communities as collective demographic actors, arguing that different types of villages developed their own demographic "strategies."

The book consists of five parts: a critique of his sources, a methodological and statistical description of how he set out to study the "demographic regimes" within the province, an historiographical and theoretical discussion of the concept of "demographic regime" and its relationship to theories of the demographic transition, a description of variations in demographic regimes within the province, and a summary of main findings. The text contains sixty-two graphs, sixty-nine maps, forty-four tables and five diagrams.

Debuisson began his study—a doctoral dissertation at the Université de Saint-Louis (Brussels)—in the early 1990s, the author informs us, but dropped the project for a number of years before recommencing work again in 2006 and completing it in 2013. The finished product bears the stylistic marks of a dissertation, both in its advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, for specialists in the historical demography of France and the Low Countries, Debuisson's exhaustive, critical analysis of demographic sources of information is essential and welcome. It is consistent with longstanding practices of dissertation-writers in the interdisciplinary field of historical demography since its earliest developments in the 1960s and 1970s. Less welcome is the dissertation-writer's concern to credit many authorities in the field. This leads Debuisson to cite verbatim long passages of opinion from a huge number of researchers whose work has in some way affected the author's thinking. The long gestation of the dissertation during a period of important methodological developments in historical demography gives some parts of the work a certain dated quality, as will be discussed further below. On the other hand, one can only admire the craftsmanlike energy and commitment to completeness that the study reflects.

The principal research question that Debuisson asks is how village communities in the province of Namur developed demographic "regimes" or systems in the first half of the nineteenth century (specifically 1815–1856) as they responded to the shaping forces of their socio-economic environment (p. 6). The territory under consideration, the province of Namur, constituted approximately 400 communes,

though their boundaries were in flux during the half-century under examination. The tightly grouped settlement patterns of Namur's village communities and the consequent need to make village-level decisions about planting and managing arable fields and pasture suggest village communities' experience acting as agents of their own destinies, including their demographic destinies. Indeed, Debuissou argues throughout most of the text that villages and not individuals developed identifiable "strategies" for demographic adaptation and survival.

Debuissou takes readers through a highly detailed history of demographic sources beginning in the late eighteenth century including population censuses, vital registration (*état civil*), agricultural and industrial censuses, and a cadastral survey. The coming of the Directory regime in 1795, when most of the province became part of the *département* of the Sambre-et- Meuse, brought a movement to improve and centralize record keeping within the newly integrated territory. Progress in these techniques was not lost, however, with the fall of the French Empire, when the province returned to the United Kingdom of the Netherlands until the Belgian revolution of 1830. Debuissou finds a great deal of continuity in the desire of state servants, including the renowned Adolphe Quetelet, to build upon improvements that had begun under the French regime.

The author begins by exploring the Province of Namur as a demographic and economic whole, at the "macro" spatial level but quickly turns attention to the "meso" or middle level of analysis between macro (provincial) and micro (family) levels. Villages are the focuses of the study, the places where, in the author's view, demographic "regimes" or systems were built, maintained, or forced to change.

Debuissou therefore needs to find a way to study variations among villages within the Province. He must find a method for drawing a sample of villages whose socioeconomic settings and basic demographic rates (fertility, mortality, migration) can help him understand variations in the province. He turns to "classification analysis," a technique used to create statistically similar clusters of entities (in this case, villages) whose members are more similar to others within the same cluster than to members of other clusters. The method seeks to maximize within-group homogeneity and out-group difference. Debuissou uses fertility, mortality and migration rates as the test variables to create these clusters, while emphasizing that he weighted villages' fertility rates most heavily in trying to distinguish different clusters from one another.

Debuissou finds six basic clusters of villages yielded by the classification analysis of demographic features. The author finds a certain regional as well demographic coherence among the clusters yielded by the classification analysis and chooses one village from each for intensive study. Types of villages have labels either economic or regional. For example, there is a group comprising communes "between the Sambre et Meuse," or those in the region of Dinant, but an "industrial" cluster as well. He chooses one village from each of the six clusters to explore carefully. Indeed, Debuissou does not claim that these six sample villages can be considered statistically representative of the clusters from which they were drawn, since the choice of the six sample villages was dictated in part on the successful survival of demographic records. Yet he does consider each as a good test village for capturing different demographic regimes within the province. He also uses censuses, vital registration and population register data on 8,000 named individuals who lived in the sample villages to calculate more finely-meshed statistics such as ages at marriage, age-specific marital fertility rates (to look for the development of fertility limitation over time), and mortality crises.

Although the author builds his village case studies in part from information by individuals, these data are not complete enough to subject them to some of the most advanced methods of demographic analysis that have developed since the early years of the dissertation. Debuissou mentions, for example, the impossibility of his undertaking "life course" analysis, which researchers use to build aggregate longitudinal histories from individual-level data. If Debuissou were designing his data collection today, he may have chosen to gather his data on individuals differently in order to make them amenable to

more refined methods for studying individuals' demographic behavior. Debusson's research design enables him to explore how sample villages' demographic regimes differed from one another but not how demographic behavior possibly varied within the villages themselves.

Debusson draws extensive portraits of each of the six sample villages, beginning with the subsistence system and then considering demographic rates as a function of those features. Sample villages vary from those with rather evenly distributed agricultural property and communal rights to shared land to those with more inequality, those dominated by large landowners and populated mainly by an agricultural working class to more industrial villages with mining and iron industries.

Results confirm some findings from previous studies of the region. At the "macro" level, Debusson confirms that the Province of Namur, considered as a whole and when compared with other regions of Belgium, was rather healthful. The province had comparatively low legitimate fertility rates and little illegitimate fertility. The area had low mortality when compared with other areas such as Flanders, which was experiencing protoindustrial development at the time of the study. This was particularly true of infant mortality. There was a certain north/south fertility divide within the province, with the northern part higher than the south. Mortality was highest in rural communes where mining and metallurgy were present. The early signs of fertility control within marriage also occurred in the south—not coincidentally, near the French border where documentable fertility limitation within marriage was well underway by the mid-nineteenth century. Inhabitants of Namur were, generally speaking, most often small landholders, who earned their living supplementing the products of their land with waged work either agricultural or industrial. The main demographic pressure during the period under study was demographic growth that threatened to upset current demographic regimes. Debusson argues that different types of villages reacted differently to this trend: by raising marriage ages, increasing migration, or limiting fertility by stopping or spacing behavior.

All of the six village portraits make sense, but there are a few hints that perhaps the spatial limits of "demographic regimes" were considerably larger than can be studied at the village level. In the case of migration in at least one of the sample villages, conditions in the "receiving" villages surely need to be considered as part of the demographic regime that migrants experienced.

Debusson's long discussion of the concept of "demographic regime" and the coming of the "demographic transition" (when European countries experienced a change from high birth and death rates to lower birth and death rates) in part three is likely to draw the most interest from students of historical demography who are not specialists in the history of modern Belgium. It is the kind of essay that one is happy to assign to graduate students to help them learn the history and development of key concepts in their field.

As is widely known, the notion of demographic transition was tightly related to modernization theory, with its tendency to draw a broad distinction between pre-modern and modern demographic "regimes." In pre-modern demographic regimes—whether in early modern Europe or the contemporary "developing world"—it was believed that demographic behavior including rates of birth, death, marriage and migration were constrained largely by forces external to the people who experienced them. Under the "ancien régime démographique," as French historical demographers called it, limits on women's reproduction, for example, were emphatically not the result of "strategies," but rather customs (e.g., breastfeeding, practices of "late" marriage) or environmental constraints: disease, poor nutrition or living conditions.

In contrast, modern demographic regimes associated with the demographic transition signaled the advent of strategies that individuals could use to determine their demographic behavior—particularly their fertility. A typical formulation of the premodern/modern contrast, echoing Malthus's work, was that whereas under an "ancien régime démographique," family size was determined largely *through*

marriage (that is, the age at which women married and their ability to marry), in a modern demographic regime, couples controlled the number of their children *within* marriage. Furthermore, modern demographic regimes involved couples that strategized their reproduction in a particular way, by deciding on the number of children they wanted and then stopping when they had reached their ideal family size.

Since the 1980s, demographers have criticized this ideal-typical distinction between premodern and modern demographic behavior. For example, researchers with access to finely meshed and continuous data on individual couples' reproductive histories have discovered evidence that even before the advent of modern contraceptive behavior, couples succeeded in strategizing the number of offspring using "spacing" behavior. They reject the older idea that couples' sole or even main way of shaping their fertility was by stopping reproduction once they reached a preferred number of children. Thus, they cite evidence that at least some couples within premodern demographic "regimes" acted consciously to limit or strategize their fertility even before the European "demographic transition" of the late nineteenth century.

How does Debuisson's work fit into this important debate? Because of data limitations, he cannot contribute much to the "spacing" versus "stopping" debate, but what he does offer here—both in his research design and a number of places in the text—is the notion that villages and not couples implemented demographic strategies in a conscious way. There is, however, a tantalizing but vague reference to the presence of "spacing" behavior among ironworkers under pressure from their employers (p. 569). At first glance, this would seem merely to be a return to the idea that premodern Europeans were constrained by external rules, facts, customs, and environmental factors, just as Malthus had argued. There is however, a subtle difference here, since Debuisson continuously emphasizes the notion of "strategy," thus positing the idea of village-level consciousness. It is a fascinating idea, but remains assumed rather than demonstrated.

In a design that began from the premise that demographic regimes were set up and lived at the village level, there was no need to gather sufficient individual histories (for example, by the slow and painful method of family reconstitution) actually to test this proposition, for example by looking at variations in demographic behavior within villages. The result is that there is a kind of a tautology at work: assume that demographic regimes work at the level of the village and that there is a group strategy to maintain them. Since data are not present for the analysis of possible differences among couples in the same village, conclude that the villages in question developed a strategy that weighed rather similarly on all of the village inhabitants. [1]

There may well have been ways for Debuisson to give readers a more vivid sense of villagers in the act of setting up various strategies to meet the demands of their local ecology, for example by exploring more fully records of parish meetings, village appeals to provincial government, or judicial records. This would have required, however, hundreds more pages and even more years of the author's dedication to the project. Somewhat surprisingly, near the end of the study, Debuisson deviates from the study's view of villages as decision-makers and strategizers, and asserts that his actors' demographic behavior necessarily had to come from *individual* choices. He writes: "no village assemblies decided on these options (p. 569)." Probing relationships between individual behaviors and village-level realities remains one of the most important keys to understanding the functioning of "demographic regimes," especially in the European past. One can only hope that the author of this interesting and admirable study will continue to pursue ways of doing just that.

NOTE

[1] For a discussion of the reality of demographic strategies formulated by groups, see Pier Paolo Viazzo and Katherine A. Lynch, "Anthropology, Family History, and the Concept of Strategy," *International Review of Social History* 47/3 (2002): 423-452.

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