

Johann Peter Süßmilch, *The Divine Order in Changes in the Human Race, on the basis of the Birth, Death, and Procreation of the Same* (1742)

Abstract

This early work on demography was inspired by English physico-theology, which sought to find evidence of divine providence in the workings of the natural world. Süßmilch (1707–1767) was a pastor, but had also studied law, medicine, and philosophy in addition to theology. In seeking to demonstrate God's rational plan in population changes, Süßmilch made extensive use of birth and death lists, and also analyzed the effects of war and pestilence. This selection includes a call for the extensive recording of demographic data in parish registers.

Source

Chapter One: Which Deals with the Propagation of the Human Race

§. 1.

The study of the complete lists of births and deaths in the lands belonging to the Kingdom of Prussia and Electoral Brandenburg clearly shows that the number of those born nearly always exceeds the number of the deceased. In most of the lists, there is not a single case in which deaths exceeded births; the lists for Electoral Brandenburg and Minden include one curious year in 1719 in which the number of deaths was higher. It is known, however, that dysentery was particularly bad in this year, which means that this year should be included under epidemics or unhealthy years and not considered as the basis for conclusions about normal, healthy years. Similarly, the year 1733 is still remembered for the illnesses of the chest that afflicted so many throughout almost all of Germany, so that the number of deceased in the lists for the Duchy of Magdeburg is much higher than in the previous and subsequent years. Nevertheless, it does not exceed the number of births.

Because such epidemics do not occur frequently, the observation stands that more individuals are born than die. It goes without saying that one should exclude plague years [from this analysis], like the ones in the Prussian lists for the years 1709 and 1710. In some of the largest and most populous cities like London, Vienna, Breslau [Wrocław], and even, for some years now, Berlin, the opposite is true; especially in London and Vienna, the number of deaths far exceeds the number of births. This is not true of all large cities, however, as can be seen in Paris, Venice, and Hamburg, etc., and this difference stems from particular circumstances, which shall be examined more closely in the following.

§. 2.

Since the number of births generally exceeds that of deaths, it necessarily ensues that the human race is continuously growing. This increase is primarily attributable to the surplus number of births. Over the entire Kingdom of Prussia, this surplus over a number of years has equaled approximately twenty thousand. The territories of our king thus increase by this considerable number [of people] each year. Over five years, this totals one hundred thousand, etc. There is no doubt that the situation in other countries is similar to ours, so that

annually more people are born than die, and the population is subsequently increasing. This has already been shown for England.[1] There is no reason to suppose that Germany, France, or other empires are different. If this were not the case—if more were dying than were being born, such a country would normally be completely devoid of residents after a number of centuries. War and the plague would accelerate this process even more. Approximately 160 years ago under Charles IX, France numbered[2] twenty million souls; its population is estimated to be the same at the present. This would not be possible if there were not a considerably larger number of births annually than deaths, for this empire has endured lengthy and difficult wars, plagues, famines, and the so-called Dragonnades,[3] which led to the departure of a large number of residents.

Germany would also, due to many events, soon be transformed into a barren wilderness, and yet thus far, aside from all the wars, it appears to have steadily increased in population, so that Julius Caesar would certainly no longer recognize it, and Tacitus would be forced to alter and omit many passages from his book on the Germans.

There is no reason, however, that these things should be different in other places than they are for us; the Earth is far from overrun by humans, and it is counter to divine ordination that the face of the Earth, which has been appointed for the abode of sentient creatures, should remain empty: so it seems justified to think that observation (§ 1) above and the ensuing increase in population are general.

Riccioli's[4] opinion must be rejected on the basis of the lists for our territories that span many years: he compared the number of births and deaths in Bologna and Florence for several years and believes that the number of humans in cities and rural areas would remain constant if not for war, famine, and plague. The well-known Bayle[5] is of the opinion—and believes that he will be generally acknowledged to be correct—that, within a twenty-year period, just as many die as are born, and that, for ex[ample] in France or England at present there are fewer residents than in the previous century because they have sent their excess populations to the colonies. It contradicts experience, however, [to assume] that just as many die in twenty years as are born. The fact that France is less populous than in former times can be attributed to war and plague. Nevertheless, I think that one should study this excess in the previous era more carefully. King Ambicatus sent two considerable colonies forth from France because he did not think he could deal properly with so many nations, as Livius[6] expressly reports. Thus it seems that his uncertainty in the art of governance was the root cause rather than an actual excess population.

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Chapter Three:

Whether or Not War and Plague are Necessary, and How Many People Live and Can Live on the Face of the Earth?

§. 17.

The question I want to answer now is this: Whether war and plague are necessary for maintaining a balance of humans, or whether the face of the Earth will soon become too crowded, if nothing halts population growth? Many are of the opinion that these are necessary occurrences. The Englishman Rudyard[7] is even so brazen as to suggest that it is impossible to go a century without war or plague, for otherwise the other elements of Creation would be insufficient to maintain the human population. Mr. Derham[8] believes these evils not only to be just punishments for sins but also wise measures for maintaining the balance of the human race on the face of the Earth. The face of the Earth appeared so full to the curious and adroit Mr. Struyck[9] that he thought the [number of] humans would stay the same as they are now and that there is at present a standstill in the increase. He did not deny that throughout an entire empire more are born than die, but rather assumed that this surplus is negated by

the plague or war. He proved his point with the case of France, where after a century the number had remained the same. And he pointed to a number of cities to support his claim. As has been mentioned above, however, the most populous cities are an exception to the general pattern of growth. I do not deny the standstill in France, or that plague and war can cause such stagnation, but this does not mean that these conditions must prevail everywhere on Earth. Mr. Struyck closes his supposition on page 392 with these words: "In the present age, the number of people on the face of the Earth appears constant. And although Graunt has concluded that the number of people living in the lowlands of England will double in 280 years—and in London in 70 years, this is, in my opinion, not certain, and no reliable observation can be made; this also contradicts the calculation for France." An Englishman might indeed desire that the population might double more quickly, for America can absorb and provide refuge for the surplus. I would like, however, to outline the reasons why I do not see the necessity of this stagnation or these plagues.

§. 18.

It seems to me that it has been assumed without sufficient cause that any given land—for example, Europe—can only accommodate and feed the present number of humans and no more. On this point, however, it is easy to be misled. There are many known places that suggest the opposite, as long as the increase in population is not too rapid, so that people have time to expand the relevant institutions accordingly. I would point to the example of Egypt. Today, it might be entirely impossible to feed the larger population of old. Only the ancient kings of Egypt knew how to do this; they created artful masterpieces because they built long, valuable trenches to divert the Nile River into the most arid fields of sand, and thereby made these arable and hospitable for many people, so that Egypt not only provided enough grain for itself, but even prided itself to no small extent on being Italy's granary. On this point, it is worth reading the report that Maillet included in his description of Egypt. The Dutch have proven no less adroit, turning boggy or flooded lands into their most luscious meadows, and thereby providing for the livelihood of many thousands. How many other places are there still in Europe where there is no necessity for stagnation or the plague? Only Moscow can continue to grow for some time before one must fear a surplus, but it must make improvements in building, which is impossible at the moment due to a lack of population. Mr. D. Grew thus had a very different idea than Rudyard, for he did not think England or southern Brittany were even close to being sufficiently populated. He wants to allow space enough for people of all classes, and nevertheless it should accommodate fifty-five million individuals, and he writes that he has already thought of a number of ways that England's population could double in twenty-five years, and multiply further in approximately thirty-six years.^[10]

§. 19.

It is known, furthermore, that the same land can be made more fruitful and thus produce foodstuffs for more people. This increased productivity by no means requires an extraordinary blessing. The Creator gave grain a much greater natural force than is generally realized. It depends only upon the soil and its preparation whether one receives a hundredfold harvest. Who is unaware of the fact that soil tilled to a sufficient depth produces much more than when tilled as is presently done? It has been proven well enough in our age that yields increase when grain is sown at the proper depth and distance. These techniques, however, require more laborers, and as long as we do not have them, we must leave things as they are. If grain yields increased, it would also be possible to keep more livestock, and there would be more manure for fertilizer. The Susian [Elamite] and Babylonian fields produce a hundredfold, indeed 200 times [that which is sown], according to the testimony of Strabo, Herodotus, and others. Who could doubt that we would not be able to win this much and even more from good soil if there were access to the necessary manpower and livestock [dung]. As a result, the same [amount of] land would be able to hold many more people than is possible under the current circumstances of human occupation. Bread is the most important for us in Europe. A minority of the people live in cities and are used to lavish surpluses. And

thus God will not send plague or war so quickly for the sake of the foodstuffs and clothing. But for a miserly and insatiable person, perhaps, there are already far too many people.

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Chapter Nine

On the Establishment of Church Registers

§. 116.

The comments thus far will hopefully have inspired the attentive reader to wish, as I do, for further lists, with which these conclusions, which have already been sufficiently confirmed with satisfactory examples, can be drawn even more firmly, especially so that the conjectures and probable consequences can either be confidently assumed and considered certain, or, on the other hand, at least shown to be totally uncertain. This can best be achieved via the church registers, provided that they are established with this purpose in mind. And as these are kept similarly throughout our lands, and as the differences in religion present no practical obstacle, especially in most of the rural provinces: it can thus be trusted that every pastor, due to love of truth, would very willingly devote himself to this rather minor task. I am especially convinced that the pastors in rural areas would be willing to provide such support because they keep the church registers themselves and are not detained by as many other duties as those in the cities. That which they have been obligated to do, and which thus far has only had a civil use, will thus be transformed into a special pleasure. For who could be of such vile disposition that he should not take pleasure in recognizing the divine dispensation in the birth and death of these individuals? Trusting thus in my fellow clergymen's willingness and hoping for their helpful inclination, why each and every one should proceed obediently, I want to briefly outline here how these lists should be organized, and to what they should pay particular attention. [I] ask especially each and every provost, superintendent, and inspector to introduce the pastors under their supervision to these regulations, since I am certain that no pastor will be unwilling to [support] such a useful institution—which exists solely to glorify God's wisdom—or to feign the expectation of such a command from a higher instance.

§. 117.

The details that I would like to have noted are so numerous that they will hardly fit in a single table. For this reason, it would be good to create a general and then several special tables.

The general table should, in addition to the customary information, note the gender of those born and deceased. By [the record of] births, everything that appears noteworthy—twins, triplets, stillbirths—could be included after the gender. Regarding the stillborn, it bears mentioning that they should not be forgotten among the birth figures. They should be included as well in the special table of those who died as a result of diseases and special circumstances, but this does not mean they do not deserve to be listed among the births. If this were not to happen, then the circumstances would be incorrectly portrayed. A general table should in my opinion be arranged according to the following draft:

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NOTES

[1] ^[a] Derham's *Physico-Theologie*, I. 4. c 10., likewise Graunt's annotations upon the bills of mortality.

[2] ^[b] *Moreri Diction. Art. France. Tom. 4. p. 149. Edit. Nouv.*

[3] Translator's note: French government policy to intimidate French Protestants in the late seventeenth century and effect their emigration or conversion to Catholicism.

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- [4]^[c] Geographia reform. I. 12. Append. Coroll. 2. p. 634. Ed. Bonon.
- [5]^[d] Oeuvres Vol. I. p. 207 or in Nouvelles de la rep. des lettres 1685. Janv. Art. 8.
- [6]^[e] L. 5. c. 34. & c. 40.
- [7]^[n] cf. Acta Erudit. Lipf. Lat. An. 1686. p. 245. und the rise and the growth of the first church of God by Thom. Tanner.
- [8]^[o] Physico-theol. p. 245. Edit. Fr.
- [9]^[p] in his Gissingen over den Staat van het menschelyk Geflagt, in his Inleiding tot de algemeene Geographie. Amsterd. 1740. p. 2, p. 328.
- [10]^[q] Philosophical Transactions. Num. 330. p. 266 and in B. Motte abridgment Vol. 2. Part. 4. p. 241. Fq.

Source: Johann Peter Süssmilch, *Die göttliche Ordnung in den Veränderungen des menschlichen Geschlechts, aus der Geburt, Tod, und Fortpflanzung desselben erwiesen*. Berlin: Im Verlag Daniel August Gohls, 1742, pp. 1–5, 67–71, 351–349 [sic]. Available online at: <http://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10927640-9>

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