

Bruce Curtis.

The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics, and the Census of Canada, 1840-1875.

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This is an excellent book. Indeed, it is a book I would have liked to have written.

Curtis summarizes his aim most cogently:

Even the most consistently executed census of population depends on a particular imaginary of human beings in virtual time and space. It disciplines empirical social relations in order to capture them in the confines of its grid.

To show the reader how the mid-19th century colonials and Canadians deployed their "imaginary of human beings in virtual time and space," Curtis provides detailed examinations of five different census enumerations: 1841/2, 1847/8, 1850/1/2, 1860/1, and 1865/71. As these dates suggest, the taking of the census may have been a single-day event but the making of the census took months and years to achieve.

Curtis' narrative of this evolution in census-making makes it completely clear that the early Victorians' ideas about what constituted "population" were at odds with those of the succeeding generation of mid-Victorians. This later generation drunk deeply from the empirical well of L.-A.-J. Quetelet's "statistics". The words in quotation marks in the two preceding sentences are quite intentional - Curtis constantly draws our attention to the social construction of both population and statistics. Neither was a neutral category that could be filled with "evidence", enumerated by impartial enumerators. Rather, the whole process was embedded in the state formation activities of the Canadian political economy.

Census questions were not asked haphazardly. There was an aim in acquiring certain "knowledge" - in much the same way that London cabbies study the A-Z Guide to gain "the knowledge" of that great city's highways and byways. To an extent, census-taking was an exercise in surveillance; but, to a rather larger extent, census-making was an exercise in the normalization of social relations, creating everyday and taken-for-granted categories into which "the population" could be organized. This point is of crucial significance and Curtis makes it repeatedly but does not, to my way of thinking, expand on it so as to show how the modern, liberal state's ideological program of self-representation was echoed in shuffling the deck of social relations. In a thoroughly-Canadian way, language issues take precedence in this account. Thus, Curtis' description of the latest and most modern of these nineteenth-century enumerations largely deals with J.-C. Taché's successful attempts to manipulate the data in a way that was most favourable for the francophone population. It was at Taché's instigation that

'Origin' was attributed on the basis of the paternal line outside Quebec; but inside Quebec, people became census 'French' if either parent was of 'French' origin. ...this way of rendering 'origins' was politically useful, as was his aggregation of 'Catholics' and his disaggregation of 'Protestants' in the religious census. The 'French' and 'Catholics' became the most numerically

important elements in the population of Canada. (286)

This construction of the population was part of the price that the Macdonald/Cartier coalition was willing to pay in order to bring the new nation's first, post-Confederation enumeration into line with newly-emerging international standards of social-scientific, statistical, information-gathering standards. And, while one can hardly gainsay this linguistic politics of information, there is another story that gets short shrift.

Not only did the 1870/1 census adopt the *de jure* principle that counted people where they usually resided - thereby avoiding the double-counting that had bedeviled the four earlier census enumerations that were conducted according to the *de facto* method - but it also created standardized census measures that were derived from property and patriarchy. To be sure, these standardized census measures were needed to effect "the transition from 'literary' to 'numerical' statistics through systematic efforts to stabilize observational and recording protocols, to circumscribe tightly the interpretive discretion of enumerators, and to banish discursive accounts of social relations." (269) Yet, equally, they were 'needed' to validate the everyday normalization of taken-for-granted categories of social organization. In this latter sense, Taché's project succeeded brilliantly since it was not until the latter decades of the twentieth century that these categories - of patriarchy, at any rate - were brought into question by Canadians. Curtis' account would have been stronger if he would have commented more fully on the irony that a francophone intellectual like J.-C. Taché, whose primary socio-political concern was with the St-Jean Baptiste Society's quest: "À l'Avenir de la Patrie" and whose primary means of ensuring *la survivance* was an encouragement of rural society by fashioning a *canadien* cultural memory through popular literature, would usher the era of rational numerical calculation into Canadian history.

The point here is that Taché might have been a schoolmate and comrade of Cyprien Tanguay, but he was also a mid-Victorian and in that guise he was even more deeply influenced by the positivist empiricism of so-called value-neutral, statistical inquiry which was a hallmark of this period. This new 'liberal' method was international in orientation and inspiration; so, ironically, Taché thought globally even while acting locally. Yet his local actions gave religion and 'origins' a significance in Canada that was totally unlike the cultural politics of statistics that emerged in other countries.

Curtis also seems to have a sneaking admiration for the modernizing project itself. He is much more critical of the idiosyncratic irregularities of the pre-moderns. His accounts of the four, earlier census enumerations betrays a fondness for the positivist empiricism of value-neutral, statistical inquiry. This is a stance that I found perplexing because it seems to me that these "idiosyncratic irregularities" are themselves revealing of the ways that pre-moderns understood themselves. If we are going to urge a critical analysis of the imagination of "population" then we have to allow the pre-moderns to express themselves in their own ways - and to appreciate that they did not understand that they were merely laying tracks through a long, dark tunnel that would emerge onto the sunlit plains of modernity. To be sure, they did things - and said things and counted things - that strike a late modern sensibility as odd; but they did these things and counted these things in ways that made sense to them. Curtis is peevish about their sensibilities; he is also rather impatient with the formidable obstacles they encountered - rudimentary communications and the complete absence of centripetal structures of governance being foremost. It is not, therefore, surprising that they were

less enamoured with the centralized systems of power/knowledge that would relegate them and their worlds to a subordinate role. In fact, if one looks at these earliest census enumerations from an earlier vantage-point - as opposed to looking at them backwards from the present - then their imperfections are a small price to have paid for such a precocious project of national self-description. These earlier Canadian census enumerations stand mid-way between the pre-modern perspective in which people and things were counted in categories that made sense to the rulers and the modern social imaginary that people and things were counted in categories that were simply "common-sense".

Finally, Curtis says a lot about the census-taking operations of the enumerators but he says too little about the census-making compilation of these millions of data-entries. It is astonishing that, in an age before any kind of mechanical computational devices, so many millions of data-entries were calculated so quickly and - for the most part - so accurately. Curtis tells us that the early enumerators were locally-selected men of "literary skills and good moral character" (102). Territorial units were therefore surveyed from the ground up by 1,073 enumerators. These moral men were thus representatives of their locality; usually they were drawn among the elite and they were more attuned to centrifugality of local issues than the centripetality of the colonial government of the two Canadas. The first four census enumerations were conducted in this fashion but in the 1860s there was a definitive break with this tradition as the centralizing forces gained the upper hand.

In 1865 Taché hired two permanent statistical clerks and an external departmental 'attaché' (Cyprien Tanguay was given a place at the public trough by his old school chum to the tune of \$100 per month plus, of course, expenses) to help him frame the questions for the 1871 census by reworking all previous enumerations. Taché organized with printers to make schedules - another long, deep draught from the public trough. Taché arranged for geographers to be seconded from the federal Crown Lands department to map the census according to the surveyors accounts. In addition, he assembled "a team of experts" - between thirteen and twenty men - who began to meet in the summer of 1870 to refine the census preparation. In all these ways, the timelines and staffing was far more indulgently funded than in any pre-modern enumeration. On April 3, 1871, 2,800 enumerators - well-equipped and partially trained in the observational protocols that Taché and his gaggle of good men had devised - were sent out with printed schedules. These returns were tabulated centrally - in Quebec - by a "competence-based hierarchy" of clerks. It is at this point that Curtis tells us little beyond "Five of the census staff officers who had prepared the enumeration remained as supervisors, and competence was a criterion for the selection of compilers." (280) I wanted to know more about how these men were selected, and by whom; what were their working conditions like ?

The creation of this *ad hoc* bureaucracy is a key lineament of the modern state formation. Indeed, given the fact that there is a red thread in his account which relates to infrastructural weakness (e.g., 69, 162, 164, and 182) it is surprising that the administration of census calculation is discussed so breathlessly. This near-silence is all-the-more surprising in that he notes that

Taché and his team had done the infrastructural work [unlike their predecessors] necessary to extend their conclusions about past census-making into the field. These characteristics of the census project make the ways in which it configured its objects of knowledge clearly accessible to observation and critique. They are not only accessible to those interested in historical sociological investigation; they were the subjects of contemporary debate and conflict....

Insofar as the project of state formation was to make its values and its "population statistics" seem normal and, therefore, taken-for-granted, further discussion of this infracultural transformation should not have stopped short at the counting house door.

Apart from my sometimes-churlish impatience with Curtis' fondness for jargon, I cannot recommend this book too highly. Reading *The Politics of Population* is a most rewarding experience; I learned a lot from it. This book is the product of mature reflection and prodigious research.

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