

ON THE NATURE OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN

Zuzana LUKÁČOVÁ

Abstract

The history of demography in the Victorian period plays an important role in the development of contemporary Britain. The main objective of this paper is to investigate the nature of demographic changes in the Victorian period. Furthermore, the paper seeks to examine the factors which affected demography in the Victorian period and to determine the extent to which these factors affected the population rate in Victorian Britain. These rapid changes had a serious effect on everyday life of Victorian people. The government was aware of the danger of rapid population growth, therefore, questions were raised about the political measures that had to be taken. The aim of this study is to shine new light on this matter. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part outlines the political and industrial situation in the Victorian period, which had a great impact on the demographic changes in that time. The next part deals with demographic changes in the Victorian period, focusing on the population politics and the consequences of population growth.

Key words: demography, Industrial Revolution, population, Victorian period.

Abstrakt

História demografie vo Viktoriánskom období zohráva dôležitú úlohu vo vývoji súčasnej Británie. Hlavným cieľom práce je skúmať povahu demografických zmien vo Viktoriánskom období. Navyše, práca skúma faktory, ktoré ovplyvnili demografiu vo Viktoriánskom období a vymedzuje, do akej miery mali tieto faktory vplyv na populačnú krivku vo viktoriánskej Británii. Tieto rapidne zmeny mali vážny dopad na každodenný život viktoriánskeho ľudu. Vláda si bola vedomá nebezpečenstva náhleho populačného rastu, preto sa načrtla otázka politických opatrení, ktoré bolo potrebné zaviesť. Cieľom práce je poukázať na problematiku v novom svetle. Práca je rozdelená na dve časti. Prvá časť načrtáva politickú a priemyselnú situáciu vo Viktoriánskom období, ktoré mali veľký vplyv na demografické zmeny v danej dobe. Druhá časť sa zaoberá demografickými zmenami vo Viktoriánskom období s dôrazom na populačnú politiku a dôsledky populačného rastu.

Kľúčové slová: demografia, priemyselná revolúcia, populácia, Viktoriánske obdobie.

Introduction

Demography is an important component not only in contemporary literature, but also in history. Demography of Victorian Britain has a key role in the history of the country. A considerable amount of literature and studies have been published on the issue of demographic changes in the Victorian period in which the factors found to be influencing the population rate have been explored (Petersen, 1979; Robinson, 2002; Rothbard, 2010). The causes of population growth have been the subject of intense debate within the community of historians. Questions have been raised about the factors influencing the population curve as well as the population politics which followed the rapid increase in population. Debate continues about extend to which demography was influenced by external circumstances (e.g. political situation, Industrial Revolution, innovations in the health sector etc.). Demography is at the heart of our understanding of the situation in the Victorian period in regard to political measures that had to be taken in order to ease the consequences of overpopulation.

This paper seeks to analyse the literature between the 16th and 18th century (Botero 1588; Raleigh 1650; Hobbes 1651; Malthus, 1798) as well as the contemporary literature on this topic as it is intended to shine new light on these debates. The major objective of this study is to investigate the background of demographic changes in the Victorian period. Moreover, the paper seeks to examine the factors which affected demography and to determine the extent to which these factors affected the population rate in the Victorian Britain. This study provides an opportunity to advance our knowledge of the demographic situation in Victorian Britain and develop a deeper understanding of this period.

The paper is composed of two parts. It begins by outlining the political situation and industry in the Victorian period. It will then go on to discussion of the factors which influenced the demographic changes in the Victorian period as well as the population politics and political measures which had to be taken by government in order to prevent the consequences which followed the rapid growth of population. A full discussion of the subject matter, however, lies beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, the study focuses on the most important events which had a great impact on the Victorian Britain with regard to demography.

1 Political and Industrial situation in the Victorian Britain

Before proceeding to examine demography in the Victorian period, it is necessary to be acquainted with both political situation and the Industrial Revolution, which are at the heart of our understanding of the history of demography in the Victorian period. The situation in politics and industry has been thought of one of the factors which influenced the population rate and led to demographic changes in Britain.

Generally speaking, the Victorian period begins with the onset of queen Victoria in 1837 and ends in 1901 when the queen died. As McDowall (1989) noted, German Prince Albert of the

Saxo-Coburg family³, queen Victoria's husband, died at the age of forty-two in 1861. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was an open talk about republicanism. On the recommendation of the Prime Minister, the Queen Victoria transformed the monarchy into a symbol of national unity and a perfect model of British family life. During this period, there was a rapid increase of the middle class. Formal assemblies, such as the official opening of the parliament or military ceremonies, carried a sense of endless tradition as a counterbalance to the social shock induced by the Industrial Revolution.

The 19th century meant for Great Britain the period of territorial expansion and stabilization of the empire. Britain dominated many territories. In the period from Napoleonic Wars to the outbreak of the First World War, many colonies fell into the British Empire which had been spreading throughout the world. The size of the empire was so enormous that it was often referred to as "the empire on which the sun never sets". Colonies in Asia, Africa, Australia and the Caribbean were ruled by a British monarch and were run directly from London. Britain managed strategic ports such as Singapore, Gibraltar, Hong Kong, and Aden. It was also under the control of the trade routes through the Suez Canal to the Southeast Asia plantations and the sea route from Cape Town to India. The British Navy had no competition and patrolled the shores of the subdued territories. This way, Britain was watching and managing its empire (Rázgová, 2001). The map below shows the British Empire and its colonies in the late 19th century. The British Empire was in possession of many territories in different parts of the world.



Map 1 – The British Empire in 1900

Source: Anonym (2013). *British colonial expansion*. Retrieved from http://www.rolian.net/swan_river_colony/The_British_Empire_British_Colonial_Expansion.html

³ Prince Albert from Bavaria was also the queen's adviser, solving both internal and international affairs. He enriched the country with the Great Exhibition and Christmas trees. Prince Albert died of typhus or "ship fever" at the age of forty-two.

According to Anděl (2012), during the reign of Queen Victoria, the country was on the top. In 1876, the queen became Empress of India. It was the time when the construction of the Suez Canal took place. Britain, after initial refusal, later became the shareholder with the largest share of the project. Until the 1870s, Britain had a leading position and dominated the foreign markets. The British fleet was also large enough to account for more than half of the world's tonnage. As McDowall (1989) mentions, the British merchant fleet increased fourfold from 1847 to 1880. More than two-thirds of the shipments via Suez Canal were British. London has undoubtedly become the center of a growing international financial system. In 1880, Britain led the world across the telegraphic communication that connected the world. As noted by Anděl (2012), in 1902, the Empire was connected to the "All Red Line" system, which included a network of telegraphic cables. The British Empire included colonies, mandate territories, protectorates, and dominions. The organization of the Empire relied on high-level transport and administration, largely facilitated by technological breakthroughs, such as newly-built railways, steamers and telegraphs. In addition to the heavy industry in Great Britain, the textile industry also grew to produce traditional cotton and wool clothing (for example, a Lancashire factory). Clothes were cheap and exported to India, the Middle East and the colonies. This negatively affected the local textile industry. The industrial power of Britain in the mid-19th century was also reflected in the transport system (McDowall, 1989). As to the transport system, Morgan (2006) draws our attention to the invention of a motor vehicle. Nevertheless, carriages were still running around the streets. The noise from the streets was not the sound of the engine, but very often it was the sound of the rumbling hooves that propelled the carriages. The air in the cities was, therefore, polluted by fumes and smoke from coal rather than exhaust gases.

As noted by McDowall (1989), in the Victorian period, rail transport was at the forefront, making the transportation of goods more efficient and quicker. Especially thanks to the railways, nearly six million people could attend the Great Exhibition, with about 109,000 people a day. For many it was the first visit to the capital city at all. However, the primary purpose of building the railways was to transport goods and reduce the cost of transportation. By 1840, approximately 3,862 kilometers of railway lines had been built, linking not only the industrial cities to the north, but also London, Birmingham and even an economically not very attractive city like Brighton. Until 1870, the rail system had almost been completed. Thanks to rail transport, it was possible to transport fresh fish and raspberries from Scotland to London in just one night. In 1851, the government allowed the transport of people at a price of 1 penny per one mile. One of the consequences of accelerating traffic was moving people to the outskirts of cities and suburbs. Most of London's suburbs were built between 1850 and 1880, as the result of an increase in demand for such housing.

Nevertheless, Britain became more and more competing with Germany, the USA, and France. It may be concluded that British were not accustomed to this kind of position. In Britain, political uncertainty deepened, which was also reflected in the war in South Africa between 1899 and 1902. There were several reasons why Britain was gradually losing its strong position that it had at the time of the Great Exhibition (1851). Many countries, especially Germany, had much

greater natural wealth (iron, coal) and land where wheat was grown. The united Germany became increasingly strong and its economic prospects were better in comparison to Britain. Both the USA and Germany were producing more steel than Britain, which was used to build a strong navy and industry (McDowall, 1989). It can be said that, in general, vast empires lose dynamics over the time and it can be more difficult to manage them. Competition was one of the factors which played role in the gradual decline of the empire. At the end of the 19th century, the United States and Germany overtook Britain in the field of economic production (Aněl, 2012). As Sanderson (1999) claims, this economic decline resulted from lower production compared to other countries (e.g. the USA, France and Germany), but also decline in technical and scientific education.

The British Empire can be considered as one of the main preconditions for the emergence of globalization. It should be noted that it was not only the size of the empire, but rather its importance in the economic and political sphere (Aněl, 2012). As to the investments, according to Sanderson (1999), most Britons preferred investing abroad rather than at home. The education system failed for it was not producing professionally-competent "human capital". All these events confirmed what was becoming clearer. Great Britain was on the way to lose its leading position in the world. However, the Industrial Revolution provided people with better living standards and, therefore, we may assume that it affected the population rate in the Victorian period.

2 Demographic changes in the Victorian period

As was mentioned in the previous part, not only was the Victorian period marked by changes in political and industrial sphere, but also in demography. As noted by Robinson (2002), The Victorian era was the time of the rapid increase of population, which resulted in overpopulation and the growth of towns and the cities. The state was aware of the possible danger and, therefore, worked on implementing measures that would slow down the population growth and mitigate its negative consequences. Table 1 shows the increase of population in England, Scotland and Wales between 1801 and 1901.

The reform in the health sector played an important role and, therefore, could be considered one of the reasons for population growth in the Victorian period. As mentioned in Jewish Virtual Library, it was Benjamin Disraeli who was dealing with the problem of hygiene and health at that time. His motives were, however, questioned by Markz of Salisbury who later became a conservative leader. According to him, Disraeli was rather a political player interested only in his personal ambitions. Either way, Disraeli actively addressed the issue of health, which also influenced demographics of the population (Anonym, 1998-2017). According to Blake (2017), after Lord Derby's resignation in 1868, Benjamin Disraeli became the Prime Minister. However, in the elections that followed in the same year, William Gladstone won and the liberals once again came to power. After six years in opposition, in 1874, the Conservatives won the elections with Disraeli, who had the opportunity to implement his proposals. The laws adopted by Disraeli included, for example, the Public Health Act (1875), the Law on Craft Dwellings and the School Act (1876).

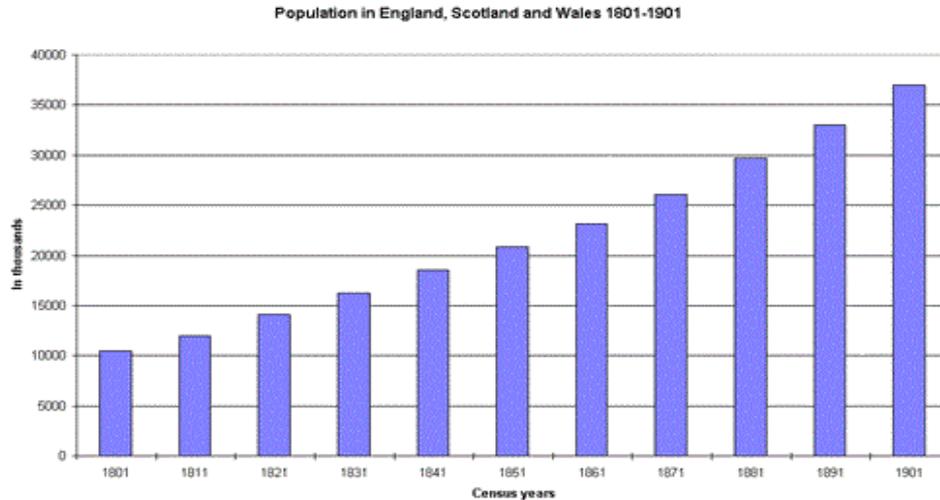


Table 1: Population growth in England, Scotland and Wales 1801-1901

Source: Hicks, S. (2013). *E. G. West on Education and the Industrial revolution*. Retrieved from http://www.bl.uk/collections/early/victorian/pr_intro.html

According to Morgan (2006), Disraeli emphasized the importance of clean water and air. He was of the opinion that people's health should be at the center of the minister's interest. The already mentioned Public Health Act ordered local authorities to clean up water supplies, secure a sewer system, and appoint medical officers to monitor health improvement. This reform, together with discoveries in the field of medicine (such as the discovery of Louise Pasteur in the field of bacteriology or Robert Koch in vaccination), defeated cholera and other epidemic diseases that had been out of control for a long time. Mortality began to decline. In 1871, the average life expectancy was under forty-five years. However, in 1911 the life expectancy for men increased to fifty years and for women to fifty-five years. Women started to use antiseptics, which prevented the spread of infections in hospitals and homes. Till then, women had often died of childbirth. It could be assumed that Public Health Act together with fertility and mortality rates resulting from discoveries in the field of medicine, i.e. the use of antiseptics, may have influenced demography and affected the population rate in Victorian Britain.

Robinson (2002) points out that in the early 19th century, the country introduced measures to reduce population growth. One of the measures was the elimination of family allowances (known as laws for socially dependent) and the transfer of criminals into colonies. It may be, therefore, concluded that adapting policy towards growing population supports the claim that the British government intended to influence the country's demographics.

2.1 Population politics

Rapid population growth caused problems that needed to be addressed. Nicole Machiavelli, Giovanni Bottero, Walter Raleigh, Thomas Hobbes, William Petty, and Josiah Childe had been dealing with the problem of rapid population growth long time ago. Many philosophers, politicians, and economists had seen the rapid rise in population as the main cause of plague, hunger, and war. Nicollo Machiavelli argued that if the world was so overwhelmed that people would not be able to live in one place and would not be able to move anywhere else in the world, the world would purify itself by famine, floods or plague (anonym, 2011). At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, there was a gradual change in the state's economy. The former system regarded the economy as a fully controlled entity by the state. Monopolies, grants, royal provisions, all of that formed a vast colonial and business empire. During this period, liberal ideas came to the foreground. These were not only manifested in politics, but also in economics. The liberalists did not trust the power of the state because it interfered with the "distribution" of the wealth that arose from competition. Economic liberalism was built on a free market economy and private ownership (Minogue, 2013). As Robinson (2002) mentions, laws for socially dependent people were perceived as an obstacle towards the industrial development. This system of support for the poor was tied to the parish, thereby it discouraged the unemployed workers from engaging in industrialized cities that had been growing. As the poor were guaranteed certain benefits, the lowest salary that the employer had to pay to the labour force was indirectly determined. In general, these laws were considered as the promotion of loafers and voluntary unemployment. Later, the taxes necessary to pay the rates, i.e. benefits for socially dependend, were unbearable and they were deviating finances from more profitable investments in trade and industry. According to contemporary educators (Robinson, 2002; Minogue 2013), these laws led to increased birth rates in the country. The modest but guaranteed income provided by this system encouraged young people from poor conditions to early marriages and large families. Thomas Robert Malthus, a member of the clergy of the Anglican Church as well as a demographer and economist, provided his own opinion that led to a re-consideration of the previous economic system. According to Robinson (2002), the mentioned laws for socially dependent came to existence at the time of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The purpose of those laws was to provide relief, support and allowance for physically disabled, elderly and poor citizens and families. As Minogue (2013) noted, it was these laws that made life easier for the poorest, and many experts nowadays still address the question of whether these laws led to a high birth rate of poor citizens and thus affected the increasing birth rates in poor families.

T.R. Malthus and his population theory had a great impact at the time. His work *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) clearly denied the previous mercantilistic view that population growth is a positive phenomenon. In the book Malthus claims: "Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will shew the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second" (Malthus, 1798, p. 4). As Robinson (2002) explains, excessive fertility and rapid population growth became a serious social problem. Paradoxically, the attempt to try to reduce poverty made things worse. It may be assumed that Malthus's views, in fact, changed the direction

of ideological and intellectual thinking about the rise in the demographic curve. Most of the English majesty shared his views. The Malthus population principle and the conclusions drawn from it were accepted by leading educators, intellectuals, writers, representatives of the Anglican Church, and masters.

The procedure to prevent enormous population growth consisted of three basic measures. Firstly, the social rescue network for the poor was removed and the policy was dropped. In 1832, the Royal Commission of Enquiry on the Poor Laws⁴ was founded. The second point of the reform of the population reduction system was emigration⁵. The emigrants were not only poor citizens, but also criminals. This was a new way to tackle crime in Britain as well as reduce the population numbers. People emigrated to British colonies such as New Zealand, Australia, Canada and South Africa. The third point of the reform was the expansion of anti-natalist ideas between intelligence and nobility. Through them and the contemporary writers, these ideas reached out to the ordinary people. Propaganda started. On the other hand, it should be noted that the Church in England was not clearly for a planned parenthood. The moral aspect was problematic. The church was, however, aware of the connection between excessive birth rates and poverty (Robinson, 2002).

As Rothbard (2010) mentions in his biography, it was Giovanni Botero, an Italian machiavellist who pointed out the dangers of population growth. In his work *On the Cause of the Greatness of Cities* (1588), he outlined the same beliefs about survival, as interpreted in Thomas Malthus's work *An Essay on the Principle of Population* more than two centuries later. In addition, Petersen (1979) claims that Walter Raleigh in his *Discourse of War in General* (1650) points out to the fact that the growth of population induced the "daily wars which afflict the whole earth (p. 173)". Another personage who was involved with the issue of population growth was Thomas Hobbes. In his work, *Leviathan*, published in 1651, claims that "and when all the world is overcharged with inhabitants, then the last remedy of all is war; which provideth for every man, by victory, or death" (p. 255). On the other hand, there were people who considered population growth to be a positive phenomenon. According to Rothbard (2010), one of these people was William Petty who held the view that the larger the population, the greater the income and the production. This is also why he sought to increase employment to the maximum. He leaned on the side of the aristocrats rather than the working class. Businessman and economist Josiah Child also belonged to those who saw the increase of the population positively. Josiah Child emphasized the need for government relief for the unemployed and the poor (Abdullah, 2015).

The reasons for the population policy were clear. As Robinson (2002) noted, even Malthus was aware that planned parenthood could encourage immoral behavior and undermine the foundations of the family. The idea of fewer families was first assumed in the higher classes and gradually moved to the middle class and the working class. It is, however, questionable to what

⁴ Its members were high-level educated bishops Blomfield and Sumner, professor of political economics Nassau Senior and health reformer Edwin Chadwick.

⁵ According to statistics, between 1811 and 1841, 100,000 men and women were transferred to two Australian colonies. In 1868, the transport of convicts was terminated.

extend the socio-economic conditions had impact on the population decline as well as the influence of popularizing the idea of families with fewer children, which was considered as “right”.

2.2 Consequences of population growth

So far this paper has focused on both the factors which affected demography in Victorian period as well as the population politics and measures which were taken. The following section will discuss the consequences caused by population growth. Within one class, there were people with different assets, professions (in the fields of medicine, law, public procurement, navy, military, church, trade, diplomacy) and social status. It can be said that the real source of wealth in the monarchy were merchants. The rise of cities and towns during the reign of Queen Victoria was associated with an increase in the middle class and the working class (McDowall, 1989). According to Loftus (2011), the line between the middle class and the working class was not exactly defined. The middle-class man had many times larger assets than an aristocrat, and a skilled worker could have had more money than some middle-class officials.

One of the consequences was overpopulation. As noted by McDowall (1989), the cities and towns were overpopulated and did not provide healthy conditions for living. According to the statistics, one child out of four died before the age of one. In 1832, cholera broke out, resulting in the death of 31,000 people. Proper sewerage and water supplies were allocated to those who could afford it. In the mid-19th century, hygienists were appointed in cities to ensure safe water and proper sewerage. Thanks to these measures, the number of people infected decreased. The role of these health officials was, among other things, to ensure that residential areas were not overpopulated. On the other hand, there were slum areas occupied by workers where the houses were built close to each other. These slum areas were considered the poorest parts of the cities. The picture below shows how these slum areas looked like.



Picture 1 – Slums in the Victorian period

Source: Price, P. (2014). Victorian Houses and Where Victorians Lived. Retrieved from <http://www.victorianchildren.org/victorian-houses-how-victorians-lived/>

The Victorian period is a cradle of modern police. By adopting the regional and self-governing police law in 1856, police departments were established throughout the country. Provincial police were under the administration and the central government. It was conducting

criminal investigations and trafficking. Half of local police spending was funded by the central government, with the rest being funded by local governments (Walsch, 2015). It may be assumed that people felt more secure and safe in the cities thanks to the police departments.

In the middle of the 19th century, the face of the cities and towns changed. Working environment in factories, houses of workers, education and health policy improved and went hand in hand with the development of administration and science. Sidney Webb, a socialist, considered as the pride of the city authorities and organs, put into existence the following changes: „The town councillor will walk along the municipal pavement, lit by municipal gas and cleansed by municipal brooms with municipal water and, seeing by the municipal clock in the municipal market, that he is too early to meet his children coming from the municipal school ... will use the national telegraph system to tell them not to walk through the municipal park, but ... to meet him in the municipal reading room.“ (McDowall, 1989 p.152) Morgan (2006) highlights the fact that many people moved to the city for work, therefore, the number of labourers working in the industry began to expand. Unskilled workers were gathering in trade unions in order to protect their own interests against the employers who intended to cut their salaries. Members of these unions called for increase in salaries, shorter working hours and a safer work environment. Moreover, the peasants started establishing their unions, such as the National Union of Agricultural Workers founded in 1872. However, they suffered a great loss in times of bad harvest, which led to the great economic crisis in 1870 and 1880. As to the administration of the towns and cities, according to McDowall (1989), in 1888 the Conciliation Judges lost their administrative powers and local government. Since then, they could execute judgments only in very small cases. The new regional councils, which made important decisions, consisted of duly elected men, women and administrative staff. Such a system is still ongoing. The rise of the cities, towns and villages was obvious. The power had already ceased to concentrate in counties, but it moved to towns. At the beginning of the 19th century, the landowners of the village could use their power to rule the village. They could, for example, fence the common land for their own use, or send the children to work at workhouses. However, in 1900, they were no more than a harmless memory of an earlier period.

Conclusion

Taken together, this paper extends our knowledge of the nature of demographic changes in the Victorian period. The findings enhance our understanding of both causes and consequences of the rapid population growth which resulted from various factors and had a great impact on politics and everyday life of Victorian people. Returning to the subject of demographic changes, as was pointed out in the introduction to this paper, in order to understand the reasons of demographic changes at that time which proceeded the population growth, it is important to investigate the factors and conditions (political, industrial, domestic etc.). The evidence from this study as well as the findings provide the insights for future research. A future study investigating other factors which could be taken into consideration with regard to Victorian demography would be of great help in understanding „the bigger picture“ of the period.

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Author: Mgr. Zuzana Lukáčová, full-time PhD. student, Institute of British and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Presov, Slovakia.
E-mail: zuzana.lukacova@smail.unipo.sk