

Food Crises and Demography in France during the Ancien Régime

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An abnormal soaring of cereal prices coinciding with a rise in the number of deaths and a decline in birth rate, both also equally exceptional, are the characteristic traits of the great food crises in France, as those of 1693 or 1709. But these phenomena would not have been detected with clarity had the detailed calculations not been made on the basis of the harvest year instead of the calendar year. From the first half of the eighteenth century onward, crises of this kind disappear. Nonetheless, inflation of prices continues to exercise an influence on demographic movements, which is no less important for not being as evident.

Various research studies have furnished us with proof that the years during which the price of wheat has been the highest have been at the same time periods of increased mortality and widespread disease.

This is how a dissertation entitled *Réflexions sur la valeur du blé tant en France qu'en Angleterre depuis 1674 jusqu'en 1764*, published soon after *Recherches sur la population* by Messance, in 1766 posed a major problem: the impact of food shortages on demography in France during the Ancien Régime. The problem, a highly complex one, may be broken up into a number of questions, some of which can scarcely be resolved, at least in the form in which they are normally posed, while others do allow for solutions through detailed research which is yet to be undertaken, though its underlying principles can be expounded.

How can a rise in mortality resulting from crises of subsistence be defined? The scientific circumspection of the author of *Réflexions* is noteworthy: he indicates the coincidence of the maxima of wheat prices with the highest annual death rate, but to this he adds that these years were also a period where the sickness ratio attained its highest level. Any attempt to differentiate statistically between occurrences so closely related would be futile: between death by simple starvation, death resulting from disease but attributable to malnutrition, and finally death by contagion, itself inseparable from a state of scarcity which contributed not only to the rise of disease but to its spread through the movement of poor vagrants. Apart from the extreme case of 'physiological distress', what role did problems related to the distribution of provisions play in causing death during our period, especially in cases where the officially declared reasons do not enable us to ascertain the actual cause of death?

It is possible, however, to identify with precision the years where exceptional levels of mortality could be attributed to acute food shortages. These years are easy to locate. The phenomena here are of such magnitude as to have left behind abundant corroborative evidence. Even historians marginally concerned with the study of economic and social realities cannot overlook happenings such as those of 1693 or 1709. There exists a considerable number of monographs on these events which leave no trace of doubt about a relationship of cause and effect between a rise in prices, extreme poverty and death.

But as we attempt to further define and quantify this mortality, problems arise. Statistical evidence on population movements was not unknown during the Ancien Régime, though it made a rather late appearance. By the time it did so, in 1772, the great crises of mortality linked to an exceptional rise in wheat prices, already belonged to the past. To be able to study these phenomena at their height, it is necessary to return to an earlier epoch, to the age of Louis XIV as well as the preceding centuries.

For these periods, there are no statistics. We possess, on the other hand, a different source of evidence, sporadically available and often of doubtful quality, until 1667, but very widely preserved and of a generally good quality later on, a source essential to any retrospective demographic study: the registers of baptisms, marriages and

deaths. Thus the last years of the reign of Louis XIV appear to be the most favourable period, or at least the least unfavourable, for this kind of research.

But a trap awaits us, crude enough to make us wonder at the number of excellent scholars who have allowed themselves to be caught in it, and serious enough to call for special insistence on underlining it. While speaking of a year of crisis, we apparently seem to know what we are saying. But on what concrete reality does the word 'year' rest? The fluctuations which form the subject of our study, be they metereological, agronomical, economic or demographic, cannot be conveniently enclosed within the arbitrary forms of a 'calendar year', from 1 January to 31 December.

The difficulty here is a major one. The exceptional rise in prices of foodgrains takes place naturally within the framework of a harvest year; the data, when presented according to a calendar year, undergo distortion of an extremely disturbing kind.¹ Experience has proved that the same applies to the unprecedented rise in mortality rates during years of scarcity. A minute examination of parish registers, month by month, brings forth this realisation. When set within the time bracket 1 August to 31 July, the rise in the death toll emerges in sharper relief than if calculated in the usual manner.

In this manner a number of otherwise meritorious publications, like those of Oursel (Introduction to Vol. V of the *Inventaire des archives de Dijon*), of Brossard for Bourg-en-Bresse and of Faidherbe for Roubaix, appear suddenly divested of their significance, at least from the above standpoint.

If, as we believe it should be, a more detailed and extensive examination of the data contained in parish registers is collectively undertaken on a national level, it should be obligatory that the original sheets are preserved, that these carry a monthly breakdown of figures and that the final publication furnish totals calculated on the basis of harvest years.

A further argument in favour of the methodological rectification suggested can be drawn from a study of fertility and conception. A pronounced drop in the number of conceptions seems to have escaped the attention of scholars who have dealt with ancient crises. It remains nonetheless an incontestable and a suggestive phenomenon, which may be observed by working nine months backwards from baptismal dates and then following, month by month, the evolution of conceptions. In this manner a graph can be plotted,

doubly characteristic of a year of acute food shortage: it would indicate almost simultaneously a sharp rise in mortality and an equally abrupt fall in the number of conceptions.²

We thus begin to consider the relation between deaths and conceptions a characteristic index of the crisis, which brings us back to the percentage of deaths and conceptions broken down, if not on a monthly basis, at least within the framework of a harvest year. This index is to be compared not so much with cereal prices themselves as with percentages of price rise, highlighting the intensity of inflation in relation to the immediately preceding period. The effects of price rise during the exceptional years under consideration were brutal, generating deep disturbances and clearly distinct from the social effects of other economic fluctuations. Inflation afflicted the plebian strata of society who lived from hand to mouth, and hence its immediate impact on demography, astonishingly rapid and violent as it may seem, can be explained. Although wages and popular incomes were slow to adjust to price rise and in this respect any inflationary movement, however moderate, was a source of suffering, inflation may be considered to have been internalised at the end of some years, as the stabilisation of high prices found a public adapted to withstand their effects. It may be added that the consequences of a prolonged scarcity, one which endured without worsening, were mitigated due to the fact that the fragile elements of the population were wiped out during the first few months. Conversely, the possibilities of a better life offered to manual labourers during a period of low prices were often frittered away by a section of them. Texts which evoke questions of this kind are rarely objective enough to be above suspicion. The unconcern, and negligence of the 'idle poor' have undoubtedly been exaggerated. But it cannot be denied that a sharp soaring of prices occurring immediately after a period of low prices constituted for many among them a rather rude awakening.

The method followed in plotting the following graphs (see p. 283) can thus be justified: here the percentages of deaths in relation to conceptions for Dijon and for the region of Gien are placed face to face with percentages of wheat prices in Rozoy-en-Brie, calculated on the basis of the median of prices during the preceding five years. It is to be noted that for Dijon the fluctuations in the percentages of deaths are considerably attenuated as a result of the artificial transformation of data, computed on the basis of a calendar year, in

order to establish parity with evidence amassed using the harvest year as a unit.

That being so, the results are fairly distinct, and the comparison between two chronological periods, 1680–1713 and 1755–89, seems striking. During the age of Louis XIV, the exceptional severity of the food crisis sufficed to distinguish it from any other phenomenon. Correlatively, the relation between deaths and conceptions, based on data collected according to the above formulated method, exhibits a thrust of comparable intensity and is no less exceptional. The national character of the crisis cannot be doubted, and the substitution of prices quoted in the market of Dijon for those of Rozoy-en-Brie would not render the concordance any more or less significant.

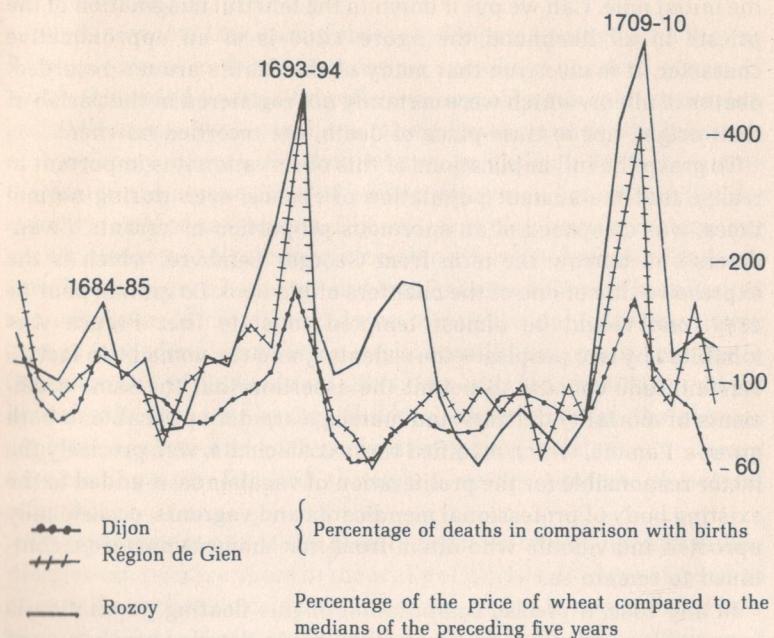
During the age of Louis XV, and even more so under Louis XVI, everything changes. No more an apparent correlation between the maxima of prices and indexes of population. If there is still a demographic problem of subsistence, its magnitude is altogether of a different order, and this quantitative difference is in itself a qualitative one. In the years intervening between two epochs—one of fatal crises, the other of crises not yet manifest—a revolution has taken place. A great revolution which remains to be studied and to which these few lines can merely provide a pointer.

In the meanwhile, all we have done is to identify through illustration certain known facts and to constitute statistical measures as part of normal historical documentation. Can one hope to go further and one day be able to evaluate the demographic consequences of food crises? At first sight, a more detailed examination of documents in different regions would seem necessary for it is highly probable that significant local variations in the intensity of scarcities might emerge. But before undertaking a study of such an immense order, a more searching analysis of the phenomena appears necessary.

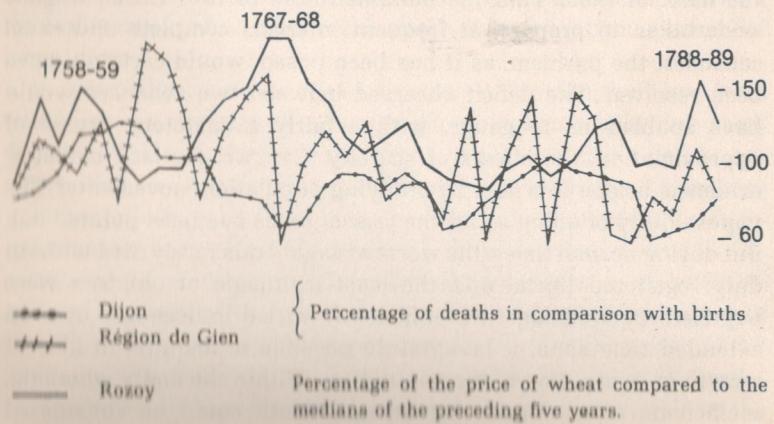
I buried 1,200 corpses this trying year; dogs ate up the dead bodies they found lined along the main roads.

Let us leave aside for the moment the picturesque macabre note on which the register of Gien-le-Vieil opens in 1709. But on all counts only 241 deaths have been registered here from January to December. It may be added that of this total, 17 are anonymous; sometimes a place of origin is mentioned, at others the only indication is 'poor

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mendicant'. In any case, one is far from the figure for burials cited in the initial note. Can we put it down to the fanciful imagination of the priest? In all likelihood the figure 1,200 is of an approximative character. It is also true that many of the deaths are not recorded: deaths of aliens, which were certainly not registered in the parish of their origin, nor in their place of death, are recorded nowhere.

To grasp the full implications of this observation it is important to realise that the ancient population of France, even during normal times, was composed of an enormous proportion of 'errants' ('wanderers'), to borrow the term from Georges Lefebvre, which is the expressive title of one of the chapters of his book *La grande peur de 1789*, one would be almost tempted to state that France was inhabited by two peoples—the sedentary and the nomads. In fact all versimilitude concurs to permit the assertion that the same coefficients of mortality, fertility and marriage are not applicable to both groups. Famine, which modified these coefficients, was precisely the factor responsible for the proliferation of vagabonds; it added to the existing body of professional mendicants and vagrants, occasionally uprooted individuals who often, from that moment onwards, continued to remain so.

In any case, a precise computation of this floating population is impossible and for this reason the results of a detailed breakdown of figures relating to deaths from starvation are vitiated from the start.

Are we then caught in an impasse? Only experience will tell. We have at our disposal in the form of marriages, baptisms and deaths, three series of data, spaced out in time: we could always try to make the most of them. Had the administrators of the Ancien Régime undertaken to prepare, at frequent intervals complete and exact censuses, the problem, as it has been posed, would certainly have been resolved. The deficit observed between two censuses would have enabled us to gauge, with a fairly satisfactory degree of approximation, the effects of scarcity. Can we, for lack of better evidence, bridge this gap, by studying population movements? The impossibility of doing so for the year of crisis has been pointed out. But during normal times, the worst of vagabonds rarely died without duly registered burial and the least legitimate of children were baptised. By working with sufficiently varied indices and over an extended time span, it is certainly possible to acquire an idea of growth or diminution of the population. Within the limits where the coefficients of marriage, disease and death could be considered

relatively stable, each of the three series of data can serve as a basis for evaluation.

But it is evident that each of these coefficients undergoes on the one hand a secular evolution (occurring once in a hundred years) of which the period under study offers us several memorable examples, and at the same time it can momentarily fluctuate under the influence of temporary factors, be they erratic or cyclical. In fact, famine dislocated the composition of human groups and consequently the overall worth of coefficients. Difficult as it may be to ascertain, our survey seems to indicate an appreciable difference between the death rate during years of scarcity and that in normal times. This resulted not only in a different breakdown of population according to age groups immediately following a crisis, but in important changes in the strength of individuals likely to opt for marriage and of households prone to having children, as much as in the average physical capacities of each generation whose resistance to disease was momentarily fortified through a severe process of natural selection.

More important still is the need to consider certain countervailing phenomena which appear in the wake of a crisis. It may not occur to anyone, I suppose, to calculate the demographic losses suffered by a country at the end of a great modern war by recording the figures of marriages before and after the upheaval. Nevertheless, over a fairly long period of time, the coefficient of marriage, at least in our country, is amongst the least unstable. But it is well known that in the months following the cessation of hostilities an efflorescence of 'delayed' marriages can be witnessed. Calculations would in this manner lead to the absurd conclusion that there was an augmentation of population.

In fact, the observation of simple series of facts in their raw form facilitates a perception of several such phenomena following great famines. There is almost invariably a sharp decline in deaths, so sharp that it is difficult to explain solely in terms of general demographic trends. One is led to admit that famine conditions preempted a number of deaths which would have occurred in the normal course during the following years. Conversely, one observes not only the coming into being of delayed marriages, but a much more significant rise in the number of conceptions. The flowering of the birthrate together with a diminution in the number of deaths produces on our graphs, after a steep rise, an abrupt fall in the

percentages relating one to the other. Finally, in view of the importance of such equalising phenomena, one wonders whether these terrible crises were not, demographically speaking, reabsorbed within a fairly limited number of years, rendering thereby futile all efforts to calculate their intensity by extrapolating later conditions.

This objection is further reinforced at another end, making it all the more difficult to overcome. A good number of the victims belonged to a very special demographic milieu which was destined to disappear without leaving any trace—a milieu where fertility was certainly low and infant mortality high, a milieu which even during normal times was afflicted daily by crises that hardly ever penetrated the solid physique of the peasant rooted to the soil.

Amongst the various merits of the author of *Réflexions* quoted above, was an investigation of hospitals conducted by him. Though limited in scope, the results of this investigation are worth highlighting. During the years of high wheat prices, as compared to normal periods, a large proportion of deaths took place in hospitals. This is true not only for the terrible inflation of the age of Louis XIV, but also for the epoch of Louis XV. During two years, 1740 and 1741, deaths within the population of Paris numbered 48,858, registering an increase of about one-fourth over the normal. But at the Hotel-Dieu, during these two years, 15,085 deaths were recorded, as opposed to the figure of 9,796 for two normal years, indicating, in other words, an increase considerably over 50 per cent. It needs to be pointed out that the word 'hospital' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries must be carefully distinguished from the institution which carries the name today. It was a place where the sick were taken care of, but these represented only a section of the diseased within the overall population. They were all poor patients; those who were not 'poor' in the most rigorous sense of the term—in other words, indigent—did not go to a hospital. Famine, which annihilated extensively a section of these human beings, on the roads, in their huts, in the barns where they sought refuge, merely condensed within a few dramatic months a history which otherwise dragged its weight through insignificant episodes of routine suffering.

The reign of Louis XV witnessed the disappearance of the great food crisis which one is tempted to call by its traditional name 'famine' in spite of the confusion to which the term lends itself.

However it is only later, during the second half of the eighteenth century that the great thrust of demographic growth, harbinger of a

new age, can be observed. For alongside, with an acute crisis existed a veiled form of starvation. The latter remained latent even while prices did not appear excessive on the market lists. This aspect of the problem of subsistence and demographic fluctuations may, owing to its somewhat permanent character, possibly be the most interesting. But can one ever hope to arrive at a solution? A year of famine, at its peak, is a precise form of data which allows, upto a point, rigorous calculations. Beyond it extended a complex of endemic unemployment and growing indebtedness leading to the tightening and loosening of fixed exploitation, in which the price of wheat certainly played a role: but it did not kill, at least not immediately, nor all at a time. It eroded gradually.

NOTES

1. On this subject see my article in *Mélanges d'histoire sociale*, vol. V.
2. I have published a graph of this kind in the *Journal de la Société de statistique de Paris*, May-June 1944.