

Ecological Demography: Why Did the Revolution Occur in France, but Not in England?

Review of Sheila Newman, *Land-Tenure & The Revolution in Democracy & Birth Control in France*

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Land-Tenure & The Revolution in Democracy & Birth Control in France is book three of a four-book series of *Demography, Territory and Law* with book four forth-coming. In my opinion, the works make a major contribution not only to historical research, but to philosophy in the broad sense of a rational anthropology, a systematic discourse about the nature of the human condition (Hanna, 2021, 2022). It also makes a contribution to the somewhat neglected field of philosophical demography (Pavlik ed., 2000).

Newman sets out to explain why a revolution occurred in France, but not England, using a multidisciplinary methodology. As she says:

The use of multiple disciplines is unusual because most research literature builds on a narrower base of accepted theories in a single discipline and expects the reader to have some familiarity with the material. This is a limitation of the academic environment and why this book was written outside of an academic institution (Newman, 2023, 245).

As we will see, Newman's project certainly stands against the narrow professionalism and specialization of much of academic social science, which has limited thinking about topics to be discussed. She investigates the origins of the French Revolution using demographic patterns, land-tenure and inheritance systems and comparative research. As well as this she uses a framework of sociobiology to show the causes of major social and political differences between British and French societies, and why a "democratic (republican) revolution" occurred in France, but not in Britain, Ireland or French Canada.

The works aim to establish the thesis that democracy flourishes in systems that preserve power in local control, and local control is most sustainable when the populations have strong clan and family connections to the locality and land. On the other hand, market capitalism is most resilient in systems that break up local power and families from their locality.

Population viscosity is characterized by living long-term in the same territory with limited dispersal, and being endogamous, involving marriage within one's tribe, clan or community (Dawkins, 2016, 282; Newman, 2023, 22). Viscous populations, through the consolidation of kinship relations, increase trust and the capacity for

individuals within groups to effectively organise for political actions (Newman, 2023, 48), compared to dispersed, atomized populations (Newman, 2023, 44).

Land-Tenure & The Revolution ... sets out to show that population viscosity promotes political self-determination and population number stability. Newman, in reviewing the historical data, shows that land-tenure and inheritance practices in France reinforced viscosity. This is unlike the situation in Britain, which experienced social atomization, produced by land-enclosures and its Salic inheritance system (Laslett, 1965).

Old Regime France, compared to Britain of the time, had a clan-based land-tenure system that was able to transform intergenerational values more readily than the atomized, individualized society of Britain. This higher level of social trust enabled the seeds for the “democratic revolution” to be sown and cultivated over a number of generations. In Britain, the upper classes were much more viscous and endogamous than the lower classes and were able to oppose any revolutionary spirit that might arise from below, so that attempts of a revolution in Britain and Ireland failed.

Land-Tenure, the Inheritance Systems and Birth Control

Salic law was imposed by William the Conqueror in 1066 in England, establishing male primogeniture, preventing women from inheriting land. Norman conquest had established this system of male primogeniture, where the rights of the eldest son to succeed to the estate of his family to the exclusion of others, was given. Although Normans (Vikings) were from France, the male primogeniture system had existed only among nobles. Even this was eliminated by Napoleon’s Civil Code, which had equal inheritance for all children. That was not so in Norman England, where the Viking tradition held that land acquired in conquest had to be defended, and women were not thought to be capable of this. This meant that, apart from the first son, the rest of the family was disinherited, and landless. In turn, land was concentrated in fewer hands, opening the great masses of people to being landless labour and vulnerable to enclosure. This helped provide the foundation for industrial capitalism, along with technological innovation and raw materials such as iron and coal (Newman, 2023, 113).

The English lower classes were serfs under the Normans and, after the breakdown of feudalism and the emergence of industrial capitalism, they were landless labourers, roaming the land in search of work, supplying cheap labour to the coal and iron industries. This population movement resulted in greater fertility opportunities, with marriage outside of former clans and villages, by contrast to France’s viscous and endogamous population, where there was equal inheritance for all children of the entire parental estate (Newman, 2023, 31). This was a major factor in the population explosion of Britain in the 19th century.

Old Regime France had very high fertility, and severe poverty in the lower classes, but the population still grew slowly because of late marriages and the high infant and child mortality (Newman, 2023, 208). Birth control information and the means for birth control were controlled by the ruling elites, who themselves practiced birth control. However, after the French Revolution, birth control knowledge and the means

to achieve it, were available to the lower classes. This information came from a greater democratization of the press. In Old Regime France, the church and monarchy-controlled education, writing and publications, but that control ended with the Revolution. Thus, smaller families resulted, and infant mortality decreased.

The decrease in French family size occurred at least a century before such a decrease occurred in Britain; France therefore reduced its population prior to industrialization, presenting a counterexample to the *demographic transition thesis*. The demographic transition thesis is one of demography's sacred cows. It holds that prior to industrialised economic development, societies were characterized by large families and high mortality, living in poverty. Industrial development with a "trickle down" effect, increased standards of living, with higher per capita income increasing, and longer life expectancy, and family sizes were predicted to decrease. Newman argues that the demographic transition thesis is limited in applicability, with the counterexample of Revolutionary France. Newman hypothesizes that there is a relationship between self-determination/democratization, and the demographic transition, and population regulation.

Newman argued in her earlier books, *The Urge to Disperse* (Newman, 2011) and *Demography, Territory and Law* (Newman, 2013), that contrary to Malthus' early work, human and animal populations generally adjust to the carrying capacities of their environments, due to the operation of the Westermarck effect, and incest avoidance. The Westermarck effect is similar to incest avoidance, but is the more general lack of sexual attraction among people living together in the early part of their lives. This is not a conscious process, but Newman hypothesizes that it is regulated by hormones (Newman, 2023, 263). Studies show, reviewed elsewhere by her (Newman, 2013), that hormones are affected by the presence of close family members, such as the suppression of oestrus to promote incest avoidance. This thesis that these hormonal effects will regulate fertility in accordance with the available space, was also discussed by Newman in previous works (Newman, 2013). More viscous populations are thus better able to control their population numbers, than more atomized/individuated ones.

The French Revolution

Newman's thesis is that the viscosity of pre-Revolutionary France enabled the Revolution to succeed, and she describes the many attempted revolutions in Britain that failed, including the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The details of the revolts were scrubbed from historical memory as the royal administration killed as many known revolutionaries as they could. Particularly after the French Revolution, the British government put spies in various societies that could pose a possible threat. The British Chartist land-rights protests of April 10, 1849, saw hundreds of thousands of protestors gathered near parliament but "[t]he elites told them to go home – and they did" (Newman, 2023, 36).

In France by contrast, the French revolutionaries were largely professionals, lawyers, doctors, businesspeople, travelling salesmen, and pedlars. The pedlars were important in distributing revolutionary pamphlets, and this disturbed the Old Regime so much that laws were passed to prohibit them doing such distribution, under pain of

execution. But that did not stop the pedlars. And, as well, pedlars distributed literature normalising contraception, along with pornography, and satire of the monarchy.

Newman gives a detailed discussion of the role of secret societies in disseminating the revolutionary spirit, including the controversial role of the Freemasons. Freemasonry lodges were popular in France, with the nobles and the bourgeois, and such lodges were infiltrated by revolutionaries. Contrary to conspiratorial literature in the English language, Newman follows French historians as seeing Freemasonry as being penetrated by revolutionaries, rather than vice versa. The English conspiratorial literature holds that the Illuminati were the dominant influence behind the French Freemasons. Newman shows from the French sources that there was little influence of the Illuminati upon the French Freemasons (Newman, 2023, 75).

Conclusion

Newman's four-volume work makes use of comparative historical and political analysis, using multiple disciplines, including demography, history, political theory, statistical analysis, ecology and genetics, as well as literary analysis. Detailed evidence is drawn from English and French language sources, with much of the French sources not previously discussed in English, not having been translated. As a bilingual work, many French historical sources are translated into English for the first time in this publication. *Land-Tenure & The Revolution ...* is thus an immensely scholarly work, with 810 lengthy footnotes, spanning 98 pages.

Newman's book is thus a major contribution to the fields it spans, not only for its insights into the social and ecological causes of the French Revolution, but also population regulation. The research, done outside of the academy, avoids the narrow specialization and departmentalism that characterizes much academic work now. Without the publish or perish sword of Damocles, that hangs over the head of mainstream academics, some truly original work has been able to flourish.

References

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Land-Tenure & The Revolution in Democracy & Birth Control in France is available on Amazon, [here](#).