

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Bruce Curtis. *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics, and the Census of Canada, 1840-1875*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. Pp. 385.

Historical demographers know that the census is far from perfectly reliable but, after reading Bruce Curtis' latest book, many more will be mindful of how political it is throughout. "Census making," he writes, "is not in any simple sense the taking of things as they are; in an important sense it is the making of things to be taken" (p. 305). This is not a segue into linguistic- turn mumbo-jumbo but recognition of the fact that census categories do not exist in an immanent form. The census reflects an "imaginary of social relations," that is to say a conceptualization of what constitutes "society." How "population" is understood and put into neat categories and columns involves the exercise of power and enables the further growth of power. Census making "seeks to tie individuals within an administrative grid and then to hold them steady so that they may become objects of knowledge and government" (p. 26). So, whose vision of what is to be counted should prevail? And to what ends?

The larger lessons Curtis draws from this exercise could be applied to a great many modern regimes but the laboratory is very definitely Canadian. In the Canadas between the Act of Union and the early days of Confederation, the campaign of "Rep by Pop" invigorated Canada West's interest in census taking in the 1840s and '50s while anxieties for la survivance animated involvement in Canada East. There were typically Canadian farces attached to the process as well, such as enumerators in French districts who received only English forms, or the complex and loaded question of whether such a thing as a "Canadian" existed for the purposes of the census. Certainly Canadians East and West were equally suspicious of attempts to enumerate their respective "provinces" identically: as

Curtis points out, “a uniform enumeration would make a single Canadian population when in fact there were two” (p. 98). Curtis also reveals how the results of the 1850s censuses were put to political use in Canada West as anglophones trumpeted their apparent dynamism and the “‘go ahead’ character of their society” while using the same census to fuel attacks on French Canada. Across the Ottawa River, francophones—convinced of their cultural superiority—“refashioned” their struggle against English domination into a different, more anti-democratic campaign (p.137). Making the census thus in some respects set the political agenda; taking the census could transform it all over again.

The episodic narrative of the census as an evolving project is the principal focus of this study. Curtis charts its course, attending to both conceptualization revealed in memos and nuts-and-bolts empirical evidence gleaned from manuscript returns. The early censuses were exercises in inconsistency and, in some cases, incompetence; leading officials through the 1850s, for example, could not agree whether to enumerate aboriginal peoples, and they were divided over whether to count individuals where they were found (*de facto*) or where they “normally” lived (*de jure*). Situated in the Bureau of Agriculture, census officials privileged questions related to agricultural settlement and growth, rather than, say, criminal deviance or insanity; this agricultural orientation was a legacy embedded in much later censuses. The character and goals of the census in many ways changed in the 1860s as control slipped from the hands of anglophone Tories like Cavendish Crofton (incidentally, an opponent of secularizing, democratizing, and professionalizing trends in mid-century education) to those of francophones, specifically Joseph-Charles Taché. The contribution of Taché was remarkable for what Curtis describes as his application of “feudal science,” a studied empiricism in the service of ultramontanist goals. Taché deplored urbanization and industrialization, dressed exclusively in homespun clothes, lauded the agrarian tradition of the Lower Canadian peasantry, and touted the legendary high francophone fertility rate as the key to Canadian cultural survival and dominance. The census

was thus employed by both anglo and franco conservatives (one could say reactionaries) as a means to prove the validity of their respective “social imaginaries” and to achieve measures which would preserve their idiosyncratic values. Taché’s success was greater because he applied a scientific method, because the necessary infrastructures were at last in place by 1871, and because the inhabitants were sufficiently disciplined to the census project. Nonetheless, Taché’s rural prejudices taint the results: using the *de jure* method meant that French-Canadian emigrants to the USA were counted in Canada East, and many recently urbanized Canadiens were restored to the countryside (p. 278).

Historians of education will be familiar with Curtis’ work on the rise of the educational state, which charted the intimate relationship between institutionalized schooling and the project of building the nation as an administrative and ideological unit. The story of how the Canadian census was introduced in the 1840s, revised, cynically used, and rendered into a rather more familiar “scientific” form in the 1870s continues and expands this preoccupation. Given the extent to which the relationship between the state and education is greased by statistics, this study deserves a wide circulation among those who subscribe to HSE; demographic and social historians may ignore Curtis’ findings at their peril.

There are weaknesses, of which I shall mention but two. First, the author painstakingly demonstrates how politically charged the “Canadian” census was but almost seamlessly grafts on the Nova Scotian and New Brunswick systems after 1867 as though they were unproblematic. Did those jurisdictions not bring some burden of “social imaginaries” to the table? Second, there is no bibliography. This may be the way of all texts coming from UTP these days but it is not an economy I welcome.

A final note. Critics of Bruce Curtis have complained that he has an unfortunate penchant for deadening jargon. Certainly in this book his style does venture onto the permafrost of post-modern rhetoric. One’s head lolls unsteadily before phrases like “largely textually mediated” (p. 103) and the observation that

“the bulimic character of knowledge-producing agencies threatens to drown political subjects in an ocean of information” (p. 310). But these are the exceptions, mostly corralled in the introduction and concluding chapter. In the main, this is utterly accessible stuff with episodes of narrative excellence, especially when Curtis turns his hand to biographical detail. And, frankly, the whole is lifted from the outset by brilliant Acknowledgements.

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Constance Backhouse. *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. Pp. 485.

This study makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of how people have come to be positioned within hierarchal and seemingly natural categories of “race.” It is a must-read for any scholar and community-based organizer interested in how racist inequalities have been, and continue to be, socially organized in Canada. Moreover, Backhouse’s documentation of the efforts of diverse people to challenge racist beliefs, practices, and institutions is of enormous significance to our understanding of the historical formation of anti-colonial and anti-racist social movements.

Backhouse frames her examination of Canadian legal history within a socially situated understanding of “race.” Rather than postulate that racism is simply the result of problematic “race relations,” thereby naturalizing the structuring of inequalities, as many scholars of racism do, Backhouse utilizes Robert Miles’ concept of racialization to make sense of the long and at times contradictory history of ideas of “race” in Canada. She successfully shows the social character of the process by which discrete categories of humans have been representationally