

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

The Politics of Population won the John A Macdonald prize for the best book published in Canadian history in a year with strong competition. It is an excellent book that will be of interest to a much wider audience than its title suggests. This is not simply a history of census taking for quantitative historians who use the census. Nor will it be of interest only to political historians or sociologists interested more broadly in governance. This is an important social, cultural and political history that looks in detail at how and why censuses were taken. It will be of particular interest to Quebec historians. Many of the main characters are from Quebec, and in the politics of population, Quebec was the key player in the past as today.

There are many reasons to read the book. First, it is an excellent read. Most chapters are lively narratives told with humour, a strong sense of human agency and analytical skill. In Curtis's able hands the taking of the censuses of 1841, 1852, 1861 and 1871 are dramatic acts, undertaken by bureaucrats both bumbling and insightful. The enumerators, on whose work so much quantitative history has been based, are seen dealing with frustrations that range from forms that don't arrive through major snow storms. In the early years, especially, numerous challenges limit their ability to do their jobs well. Second, it is a solid institutional history of the government departments and of the particular individuals who were most involved in census taking. Curtis gives a clear picture of the administrative structures behind census taking and assesses their competency or lack of it adroitly. Third, it is a detailed study about the production of a source that has been heavily used by social historians, including me, as windows into the lives of ordinary Canadians. Curtis reminds us that censuses were made, not taken. The issue of which questions should be asked, of how the forms would be structured, even the quality of the paper were all political ones. They must also influence what historians today claim to know from it. From the interaction between enumerator and enumerated, through corrections and the tabulating of responses he shows how people's diverse answers and experiences were slotted into categories not of their making. After reading the book, the constructed nature of the categories chosen and imposed is clear.

Fourth, Curtis shows how the production of that source, the making of the census was highly political. He insists, drawing on Foucault, that how a state sets out to "know" its population is a basic element of governmentality. Population was political because numbers mattered as did where bodies were located. They mattered when representation by population was an issue. They mattered as the numbers of francophones dropped relative to English speakers, or the population of Quebec declined relative to Ontario. And they mattered to a man convinced of the superiority of rural over urban life. He shows how the hero of his

tale, the man who created the most “scientific” census, Joseph-Charles Taché, decided that the 1871 census should be *de jure* rather than *de facto* like the previous one, thus reflecting where people normally lived rather than where they were the night of the census. This argues Curtis, “replenished the French-Canadian countryside” (278). Fifth, the book makes a major contribution to Foucault influenced studies of governmentality and state formation. His book is framed by this literature, and he critiques it most fundamentally in his insistence that historical context is critical and that individual actors make a difference.

The strength of Curtis’s arguments derive from his blend of solid engagement with theory and equally solid research in primary sources. These include government correspondence and publications, statutes, debates of legislative assemblies and councils, contemporary pamphlets, and newspapers. Montreal newspapers dominate in ways that make this very much a story of that city and certainly of that province. The book starts with a theoretical chapter, then follows the history of the planning and making of each successive census. In some ways, this is a rather whiggish history that details the Colonial Office’s desire for better numbers, the fiascos involved in all the pre-confederation attempts to count the population and the increasingly “scientific” procedures implemented competently by Taché in 1871. At the same time it is a passionate reminder to all readers that census taking, like other forms of governmental knowledge production, creates categories that assume a normality, marginalizing the importance of local knowledge and hiding ways of living that don’t fit the categories.

Historical geographers may be particularly interested in chapter 7, which describes how district boundaries were established. Some readers of *Left History* may find the institutional sections in early chapters a bit dry. Others may balk at the more theoretical discussions of chapter 7 and the conclusion. All readers, should ask themselves how they can interpret material drawn from these censuses, whether in the manuscripts or in published versions. The answer is not that all censuses prior to 1871 are completely useless. Rather, Curtis provides the information and analysis that will allow users of both manuscript and published censuses to be much clearer about the kinds of truth claims they should make based on the information that is available. In showing the many steps and the power relations behind the representation of the nation through censuses, he offers a compelling caution to those seeking to measure representivity through regression and other statistical analyses. In the process he makes the census more not less interesting.

Bettina Bradbury
York University