
H-France Review Vol. 21 (July 2021), No. 104

Laurent Heyberger, *Les corps en colonie. Faim, maladies, guerre et crises démographiques en Algérie au XIXe siècle. Approche anthropométrique*. Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Midi, 2019. 346 pp. Figures, maps, tables, notes, appendices, and bibliography. €25.00 (pb). ISBN 9782810706372.

Review by Richard C. Keller, University of Wisconsin.

Laurent Heyberger has produced an innovative and exciting demographic history of colonial Algeria that could have far-reaching implications for how scholars research and frame the history of public health. Adopting an approach that owes more than a bit to the physician-cum-historical demographer Thomas McKeown, Heyberger has tapped a new archive to add significantly to our understanding of the impact of French colonization and its economic and ecological consequences on the bodies of the colonized.^[1] Along the way, Heyberger demonstrates a keen ability to analyze quantitative information in a manner that suggests this method's promise for historiographical debate. At the same time, Heyberger is clear and honest about the limitations of this intervention.

How can we read the effects of economic change on the body? How can we measure the health, or sickness, of a population? What are the physical effects of a violent colonial order and its political economy over generational time? These questions are central to Heyberger's work. For decades, economic historians have argued that the most effective way to measure standards of living is to examine the average height of a population. As living standards go up, so too does the average height. This is because better early childhood nutrition—which has historically had a strong overlap with economic development—leads to more rapid growth in infants and very young children, growth that is difficult to make up in later years. As a consequence, a taller adult population generally reflects higher economic standards in that population's infancy.

Heyberger begins from this premise, arguing that changes in the literal measure of different populations in Algeria in the course of the nineteenth century tell us an important story about the impact of French colonialism. He argues that “average height constitutes a nutritional index of standards of living that allows us to account for the latter both within and outside the market, a quality that is essential for evaluating standards of living in societies that are under-administered, with largely unmonetized economies, or where subsistence economies predominate” (p. 15; all translations are by the reviewer). Although such an exercise can be “reductive” and “one-dimensional,” in a society undergoing radical transformation as a function of a hostile restructuring of its economy, an anthropometric analysis can provide useful insight (p. 15).

The stakes of the project are significant, as French colonial administrators and anticolonial Algerians alike were obsessed with demography and the impact of colonial rule. Interpretation of demographic information was in the eye of the beholder, and good information about the population was in short supply. As European settlement increased in the 1870s, subscribers to theories of hereditary degeneration rejected the apparent increase in the Algerian Muslim population, as such growth flew in the face of Ernest Renan's conviction that so-called inferior races would die out rather than thrive. Algerian Muslims, by contrast, asserted that growth of the population was an indicator of the vitality of resistance against outside occupation. By the middle of the twentieth century, those who sought to defend France's presence in Algeria touted population growth as a measure of the benefits of French rule. Meanwhile, anti-colonialists contested the very fact of such growth, arguing that the brutality of colonization had diminished the population.

Heyberger argues that given the paucity of data, a result of a significantly less vigorous system of *bureaux d'état-civil* in Algeria than in metropolitan France, population counts themselves are less reliable than other indicators of demographic change. Hence the fixation on average height as an index of standards of living. Where individual height is largely determined by genetics, the average height of a population has the capacity "to record in the flesh" what Heyberger argues is "an essential dimension of standards of living: 'net nutrition'" (p. 22). Net nutrition, following present-day WHO guidelines, is a measure of total calories consumed ("gross nutrition") minus expended energy (p. 80). In the absence of good records of factors such as infant mortality and life expectancy, records of average height offer useful insight into standards of living.

How, then, can one determine changes in stature among different social groups in the course of a century? Heyberger's sources drive his approach. He draws on military recruitment records, which include careful notations of the height of newly enlisted soldiers alongside other critical demographic information, including religion and ethnicity. Moreover, military and colonial authorities themselves were keen interpreters of these data as a function of their preoccupation with demographic and anthropometric change. Their analyses, along with the raw data preserved in recruitment registers, allow Heyberger to conduct a longitudinal study of changes in average height over the nineteenth century and to hypothesize about their causes.

Heyberger's conclusions are enlightening and at times counterintuitive. The brutal violence of colonial order could, at times and paradoxically, raise the standard of living. For example, Heyberger detects a small increase in average height in the thirty years that followed the French conquest of Algeria beginning in 1830. His hypothesis is one of blunt supply and demand: the violence of the French invasion killed so many that it increased the food supply for those who remained, despite the unprecedented destruction of cropland that accompanied the killing. After the deaths "of several hundred thousand residents caused by the invasion of the country between 1830 and 1866, the contemporaneous increase in height...of *tirailleurs* indicates that the reduction of the number of inhabitants was more radical than the loss in net agricultural production caused by the invasion...so that the availability of food per inhabitant grew" (p. 161). Likewise, the devastating famine of 1867 and 1868, which killed between 10 and 25 percent of the population of Algeria, had different consequences for living standards in different populations. Algerian Muslims born during the famine witnessed a slight increase in average adult height, whereas European and Jewish populations in Algeria experienced a decrease in height. Heyberger argues that because the famine visited disproportionate mortality on Muslims, they experienced a greater availability of food per capita as a result. Europeans and Jews, by contrast, were largely

spared significant mortality by the famine, and the larger population relative to the food supply suffered from a decline in net nutrition.

These are fascinating, if limited, observations. Heyberger is clear about what his sources cannot show. For example, there are no available data in his sources on women's average height. There is also the question of how representative soldiers, whether *tirailleurs* or *spahis*, are of the general population. Heyberger deals with these potential criticisms ably, by acknowledging the first and dispelling the latter, mainly through reference to the intersections of military service and the general labor market as overlapping significantly.

More important are the broader limitations of what this book has accomplished. It is packed with data, making it at times a dense read in the middle of the volume. And it comes up with important hypotheses about the ways in which colonial violence shaped the Algerian population in the aggregate. But historians who are seeking the kind of biopolitical interpretation of a book, like Joshua Cole's *The Power of Large Numbers*, will not find it here.^[2] Instead, the book is more a work of bioeconomics than of biopolitics. It is concerned with what the raw data collected by colonial and military administrators can tell us, rather than what the intentions and concerns of those administrators may have been. Despite these limitations, however, the book has opened an interesting door. Future scholars--those interested in employing and further analyzing these data, as well as those who may take a more skeptical view of these methods--will surely engage this book in lively debate.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Thomas McKeown, *The Modern Rise of Population* (London: Edward Arnold, 1976).

[2] Joshua Cole, *The Power of Large Numbers: Population, Politics, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

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