

Scientia Canadensis

Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine
Revue canadienne d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine

Scientia
Canadensis

Demography in Canada in the Twentieth Century. By Sylvia T. Wargon. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002. 327 p. ISBN 0-774-80818-7. \$95)

Jean-Guy Prévost

Volume 25, 2001

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800433ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/800433ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (imprimé)

1918-7750 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Prévost, J.-G. (2001). Compte rendu de [*Demography in Canada in the Twentieth Century*. By Sylvia T. Wargon. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002. 327 p. ISBN 0-774-80818-7. \$95)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 25, 85–87. <https://doi.org/10.7202/800433ar>

Demography in Canada in the Twentieth Century. By Sylvia T. Wargon. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002. 327 p. ISBN 0-774-80818-7. \$95)

Though it was a latecomer in the history of demography understood as a body of thought and techniques, Canada could benefit from its being an early starter (thanks to the French regime and the Catholic Church) as regards census-taking and birth registration records, both of which activities were indeed an invaluable asset for a "data-driven," rather than "theory-driven," discipline. Thus, writing "a *social* and *institutional* account of the development of demography in Canada" rather than a history of "demographic *thought*" (p. 3; author's emphasis) undoubtedly makes good sense, given that Canadian demography has emerged largely as a by-product of activities which had a primarily practical and administrative purpose. We can take as a reasonable working hypothesis the proposition that the settings in which it evolved have had a clear imprint upon its theoretical content and, by way of consequence, consider such a social and institutional account, however dry and factual it may appear at first sight, as a prerequisite to any further understanding of Canadian demographic thought and its theoretical-*cum*-political stakes.

Having worked at Statistics Canada for more than three decades, the author, Sylvia T. Wargon, was well positioned to observe the social

and institutional developments of Canadian demography. Her work combines the traditional written sources of the historian, the live testimony of many contemporary participants (near to 120 demographers responded to questionnaires or took part in interviews), as well as her own experience within what may be described as the flagship of Canadian demography. After a general summary on the development of demography in Europe and Canada from the 1600s, the author divides the history of Canadian demography into three periods (1900–1950, 1950–1970, and from the 1970s on) and three settings (the Dominion Bureau of Statistics—later Statistics Canada—the universities, and outside both of these). The prominence of the Bureau in demographic research relied on its unique position as provider of the raw material, statistical data, on which demographic work can proceed. Early Canadian contributors to demography have thus been closely linked to the Bureau, from Robert H. Coats, first Dominion Statistician, to still living veterans such as Warren Kalbach and Jacques Henripin, who have been associated with the 1961 Census monographs program, surely a milestone in the development of the discipline. Within the universities, demography established itself as a distinctive discipline only during the early 1960s: here again, Kalbach, at the University of Alberta, and Henripin, at the Université de Montréal, may be taken as representative of this process. Outside the Bureau and the universities, demographic research was also conducted within a variety of locations (federal and provincial government agencies and the private sectors), but this occurred essentially from the 1970s on.

There is an interesting logic at work here. Inquiring into the problems that stimulated thinkers such as Thomas Malthus in the nineteenth century required huge quantities of data that could be produced only through an elaborate apparatus capable of extracting standardized information from a whole population on a given territory. For their own practical and administrative purposes, modern states embarked on census-taking and registration activities and were in a position to attract intellectuals who had such demographic concerns or to generate these concerns within the minds of the civil servants who were put in charge of data collection. Statistical bureaus thus became the centre around which demographers and would-be demographers would converge, and the demand for candidates trained in the technical aspects of data collection and analysis would in turn stimulate the development of demography courses within the university curriculum and eventually that of whole departments of demography. Parallel to this, two other major developments took

place. Following World War II, the activities of the Canadian bureau were largely expanded and demographic forecasting and analysis became a necessity for government departments and agencies such as those dealing with education, health or housing, thus enlarging the market for demographers and creating the conditions for demography to become a profession in its own right, whose practitioners were now dispersed through a network of institutions. During the same period, the development of computer technology also had a tremendous effect on the discipline, vastly reducing the time-consuming character of data processing and opening up unexpected analytical possibilities. This was felt even more from the 1980s on, when the advent of microcomputers and, from the 1990s, that of the Internet allowed for an unprecedented dissemination of demographic data.

Wargon's book also offers interesting insights into the dual (French- and English-speaking) character of Canadian demography and the role played by women in its development. Here again, the Bureau has acted as a magnet providing a meeting point for the "two solitudes," at least from the 1960s, and Wargon makes a good case for "demolinguistics" being a distinctive Canadian contribution to demography and the by-product of what could have been an impediment rather than an asset. The number of women who have been active in the field since the pioneering days of Enid Charles is also quite impressive at first sight and surely the information gathered by Wargon should be put in perspective with the presence of women in other areas of social science. To anyone wishing to inquire further into the history of Canadian demographic *thought*, this book thus stands as an inescapable starting point and a reminder that, whatever the importance we put on theory, social science is by necessity made within institutions, according to practices, and with the help of machines.

JEAN-GUY PRÉVOST

Biographical Note : Jean-Guy Prévost has co-edited, with Jean-Pierre Baud, the book *L'ère des chiffres: systèmes statistiques et traditions nationales/The Age of Numbers: Statistical Systems and National Traditions* (Sillery: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2000). Address: Département de sciences politiques, Université du Québec à Montréal, CP 8888, Succ. Centre-Ville, Montréal (Québec) H3C 3P8, Canada.