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John W. Verano and Douglas H. Ubelaker. *Disease and Demography in the Americas.*

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jargon and intellectual pomposity that afflict so much writing in sociological and anthropological theory." Indeed he has, and I'm richer for it.

Laurence G. Wolf

John W. Verano and Douglas H. Ubelaker. *Disease and Demography in the Americas*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.

From the perspective of a civilizationist, the demographic aspects of the book seems puzzling. How can the range of demographic estimate be so vast?

In 1991 Robert Riordan gave a paper at an ISCS meeting in which he estimated the population of Mississippian Culture at 12–18 million. Ever since, it has been possible to say, in hallway conversation, that had it not been for disease, Europeans would never have conquered the Mississippians, and today there would be three countries occupying the territory of the United States: an English speaking East and a Spanish speaking West separated by a Muskogean speaking Indigenous culture.

But clearly the range of demographic estimates varies, and most of them for all of North America in the Verano–Ubelaker volume seem to be in the range of one to three million. How can this be? One of the editors, Ubelaker, provides an explanation. First he gives a table (p. 171) presenting the discrepancy as it developed chronologically. Before the 1960's, no one had estimated Pre-Columbian North American population over two and a half million. Then came Henry F. Dobyns in 1966 with an estimate of 10 million, raised to 18 million in 1983. Only Robert Thornton at 7 million (1987) came close to that. Others, including Ubelaker himself as recently as 1988, still were estimating the population at under four million.

For the Western hemisphere the estimates are equally wide, varying from eight to 100 million. Dobyns and William Borah in the Sixties tended toward the high estimate, the low coming from the 1940's. More recent estimates, including one from Thornton, fall within a range of 43–72 million.

The higher estimates of Borah and Dobyns, according to Ubelaker, do not come from new discoveries of graveyards, but from a new perspective on population that emphasized "the catastrophic effect of disease on a resistance-free" population. Using projection techniques, and inferring death rates from situations in which catastrophic death rates were known, they escalated population estimates.

This catastrophic approach has received some acceptance, according to Ubelaker, but there is "little agreement on the magnitude of early population

decrease."

Ubelaker is, however, able to estimate the impact of the catastrophic approach on North American estimates by utilizing Smithsonian's *Handbook of North American Indians* (Sturdevant 1978) and taking estimates on individual tribes or regions that took cognizance of the catastrophic approach. He comes up with a range of between 1.2 million and 2.6 million for North America, higher than most pre-Borah estimates, but nowhere near Dobyn's 18 million.

The elaborately documented estimates in the rest of the Verrano and Ubelaker volume seem to be consistent with Ubelaker's calculations from the *Handbook*. It would seem that most authorities are not accepting the estimates of Borah and Dobyns.

When we sent a draft of this review to Riordan, (besides correcting facts and spellings) he sent back an article by Ezra Zubrow (1990) that showed a great deal more support for estimates based on catastrophic decline. As Zubrow describes it, the debate is still going on and in the view of one authority, A.F. Ramenofsky, "pits ethnologists against historical demographers, cognitive and cultural philosophers against behaviorists, historians against archaeologists" with the demographers, behavioralists and archaeologists (including Riordan) taking the more radical position.

What are the implications for civilizationists? Does it seem boorishly Western to consider density of population a necessary characteristic of civilization? Does not the argument for a Celtic civilization depend on artistic, literary and religious distinction rather than cities or monumental achievements?

Well, there is no doubt that primitive societies have shown considerable artistic and religious achievement, as well they might if anthropologists are right in asserting that they had to work at food gathering and mortgage paying no more than one or two days a week. But, as Gordon Hewes and Rushton Coulborn among others have argued, civilization does ordinarily involve population concentration and monumental architecture because civilization is a long term, physically demonstrable achievement. And it makes a difference how well established, how well implanted, a civilization is.

From artifactual evidence, it would appear that the Spaniards in Central and South America encountered a very different situation from what they and other Europeans found in North America. Civilizations, once established, are tremendously difficult to change culturally. Primitive and nomadic societies can be uprooted, driven out, virtually destroyed.

The Spaniards could conquer but not destroy the Mesoamerican and Andean Civilizations. They exist today, which is why Latin America strikes visitors as unique, unlike either Iberia or North America. North Americans, on the other hand, like Australians, strike Europeans as a bit odd, perhaps a tad degenerate, but undoubtedly in the Faustian family. That would seem to be because, unlike the Mestizo, they have been little influenced by indigenous culture.

The outcome of this debate, therefore, has implications for civilizationists. The lower estimates seem consistent with most historical appraisals, but the historians have tended to be conservative in their population estimates. If there is strong reason to believe that the North American populations were much larger than supposed, there would need to be some reappraisal of the North American encounter. If there had been 12–18 million Mississippians, it would seem that North America ought to have had a very different history in the past 500 years.

There is one problem, though. This may not be the kind of debate that gets resolved by empirical data. It may be that one or the other point of view will win out because the paradigm has more resources or more appeal to a particular generation. The next generation of civilizationists, then, will be building their reifications upon very insecure set of estimates, as undoubtedly we have often done in the past. It is a hazard and an attraction of the enterprise.

REFERENCES

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