

Title—A Problem of Great Importance: Population, Race, and Power in the British Empire

Author—Karl Ittmann

Year—2013

Categories: Empire, Colonialism, Population Control, Race

Place: British Empire

Time: 1914-1970

Argument Synopsis:

Ittmann's book is focused on British imperial thinking on population control, especially within the British colonial office from the first World War until the early postcolonial period. He emphasizes the need to view British ideas about population within an imperial context. According to Ittmann, almost every aspect of imperial history concerns population. He crafts an account of how an emerging social science, demography, was shaped by Britain's imperial role and informed by contemporary preoccupations with imperial decline. Ittmann reviews imperial strategies across a wide range of colonial settings and domestic debates about commonwealth immigration and integration. This is both an intellectual and institutional history. He strives to focus on both the metropole and periphery simultaneously.

The first section of the book explains the marginality of demography within imperial policymaking and colonial practices prior to the 1940s. The second section of the book focuses on the middle decades of the twentieth century, or when discussions of population control shifted from interest groups to the heart of government. The first chapter highlights the influence of the Eugenics Society on discussions of population control. Ittmann then turns to examining the efforts of the colonial state to address population problems in the interwar years. He finds that officials became more interested in development planning at the end of the 1930s but faced a shortage of money and resistance from local colonial offices. He argues that it was especially challenging to map race and ethnicity. During the second World War, the wartime need to logistical planning and the expansion of social welfare programs expanded the influence of colonial demography and increased the pressure for reform, albeit with limited results. Although there was active debate during the period, the status quo continued: local governments and private groups were allowed to implement birth control programs without any official support from London.

The final three chapters, or the second section, trace the status quo beginning to shift regarding population and development planning as the empire begins to crumble. Ittmann then examines population in the postcolonial world, as well as British population policy in particular. He highlights the influential role of the population movement, especially the Eugenics Society, in the postwar period. This book contributes to the knowledge about migration and the resource problems of colonial population programs. By choosing to focus squarely on the Colonial Office, Ittmann does not include much reference to the on the ground reality of the people most affected by these policies.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Race and differential fertility became the primary concerns of colonial demography
- Emergence of demography as a social science was followed, in Britain, by the development of a sub-field of colonial demography
- Demography offered officials new ways of understanding and potentially managing colonial subjects, as well as a means to address perceived problems of colonial overpopulation