

## **Beloch and the Birth of Demography**

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The triumphant vindication of demographic analysis for the ancient world that Roger Bagnall and Bruce Frier have recently provided in their study of Roman Egypt can leave us in no doubt that this ancillary discipline has finally taken a respected place in classical scholarship.<sup>1</sup> There is room for debate over methods and for uncertainty over results, as Tim Parkin has reminded us in his Oxford doctoral thesis on demography and social history,<sup>2</sup> but his concerns could easily be applied to anything we do, starting with the establishment of the texts that we read. Demography is here to stay, and, if the technical expertise it demands is not vouchsafed to everyone (certainly not to the author of this paper), much the same could be said of papyrology and numismatics. Bruce Frier, in reviewing Parkin's work, declared with admirable candor, "Whatever their form and quality, statistics are the lifeblood of demography, and nothing can substitute."<sup>3</sup> Like palaeography or ceramics, statistics are not to every taste, but they are fundamental to our understanding of the Greek and Roman past. One can only be grateful that statistics have excited several gifted historians of antiquity in the last hundred years.

At the beginning of his monumental work on Roman manpower Peter Brunt wrote, "Although in my view K. J. Beloch had discovered the essential truth as long ago as 1886, his findings had never been expounded in English, and more important, objections to them had not been fully answered, and rival hypotheses, based on erroneous arguments and assumptions, retained a delusive attraction for scholars."<sup>4</sup> The work to which Brunt referred had appeared in Leipzig under the title *Die Bevölkerung der griechisch-römischen Welt*, and its author, though a German, was a professor in Rome. The basic premise of Beloch's research was that the size of a population was directly related to the sustenance it could draw from the land it inhabited, and he believed as well that no important culture ever arose without a substantial population. Hence his dedication to population studies. Mommsen, who had vehemently vilified some

<sup>1</sup>Bagnall and Frier 1994.

<sup>2</sup>Parkin 1992.

<sup>3</sup>Frier 1992: 383.

<sup>4</sup>Brunt 1971: vii.

of Beloch's earlier work as superficial and ill-informed, had personally stood in the way of his being offered a chair in his own country. Otto Seeck denounced *Die Bevölkerung* as a "numbers game" based on conjectural statistics.<sup>5</sup> When the orientalist Eduard Meyer found considerable merit in Beloch's book, he was sternly rebuked by Wilamowitz for accepting the arguments of a fool who had nothing but his own ignorance to support him.<sup>6</sup>

Brunt's opinion, rather than that of Mommsen, Seeck, or Wilamowitz, now holds the field. Even Moses Finley, no partisan of the numbers game, declared in his Sather Lectures that Beloch's book was "the fundamental work on ancient population figures,"<sup>7</sup> and Keith Hopkins wrote that Beloch's century-old discussion of the testimony for the population of Rome "still seems best."<sup>8</sup> Parkin referred to "Beloch's masterly work" of 1886.<sup>9</sup> The opposition of inordinately powerful professors fortunately failed to destroy the new subject that Beloch had introduced. No less fortunately Beloch was not a man to avoid polemic, and he stood his ground against the titans. His was not a particularly attractive character, but it was strong. When he came to publish his autobiography in 1926, he wrote, "Ever since Pythagoras offered a hecatomb to the gods after the discovery of his theorem, all the cattle start mooing as soon as a new truth is revealed."<sup>10</sup>

For reasons of health the young Beloch received most of his university education in a warm southern climate. He attended the universities of Palermo and Rome in the 1870s, and his exposure to the land of the ancient Romans rooted his interpretations of the past in the realities of geography, topography, climate, and agriculture. In comparison with his compatriots in Germany who concentrated on texts and *Quellenforschung*, Beloch looked at space, sustenance, and population. He began with the Greek communities of Campania, and returned to Heidelberg in 1875 in the hope of securing a degree on the basis of his researches. But after brilliantly passing the *rigorosum* he found that the examiners of his thesis on Campania were unhappy with his novel methods of social history and gave his work back to him for revision. With that rebuff Beloch returned to Italy without revising the thesis and

<sup>5</sup>Seeck 1897.

<sup>6</sup>Calder III 1994: 121: "Sie haben in Ihrer geschichte dem gecken Beloch sehr viele auf seiner profunden ignoranz beruhenden behauptungen geglaubt." The minimal capitalization is Wilamowitz's.

<sup>7</sup>Finley 1973: 182 n. 41.

<sup>8</sup>Hopkins 1978: 97.

<sup>9</sup>Parkin 1992: 5.

<sup>10</sup>Steinberg 1926: 12. The lines from Beloch's autobiography are cited in Italian translation by Gallo 1990: 122.

undertook to make his career there through the patronage of Roberto Bonghi. His work on Campania was rushed into print in 1879 to fortify his application for Bonghi's chair at Rome, which he retained for most of his scholarly career. Beloch was the successful candidate for a chair at Catania seven years later, and, although he declined the post, he never forgave a member of the election committee who opposed him. In his autobiography he cruelly stigmatized the offending party as "the Tunisian Jew."<sup>11</sup>

It is regrettable that this pioneer in ancient history was at the same time an arrant anti-Semite. His combative nature was, to some extent, his protection in the struggle with senior scholars who tried to destroy his credibility, but if the flaws in his character make that struggle less appealing than one might wish, it is nonetheless good to be reminded that fruitful controversy is never waged between armies of truth and armies of falsity. When Beloch proceeded in the year after the appearance of his *Campanien* to publish his work on the Italic tribes (*Der italische Bund*) he was overtly challenging the views on the late Republic that Mommsen had made canonical in his *Roman History* of thirty years before. The work contained an ample chapter on the population of Italy ("Die Bevölkerung Italiens"), and it was full of demographic analysis and calculations of land size.

Such views, combined with rebarbative tables of numbers, horrified Mommsen, who wasted no time in denouncing Beloch's approach as lamentably superficial. In 1883 in an article on the Italian colonies from Sulla to Vespasian he attempted to destroy Beloch and his work in language that even today seems shocking in its vehemence: "Hardly ever has a monograph been written with a similar neglect of specialized research, and hardly ever has anyone embarked upon a journey into the wild blue yonder of scholarship with so little luggage."<sup>12</sup> With Theodor Mommsen leading the attack, Beloch had virtually no chance of serious recognition in his own country.

But that did not stop Beloch from pursuing a vast program to write the history of population in Europe from antiquity through the Middle Ages. The volume that appeared in 1886, *Die Bevölkerung der griechisch-römischen Welt*, was the first step in this grandiose enterprise after the important chapter in *Der italische Bund*. In 1884 Robert von Pöhlmann had ventured into the area of demography with the support of Mommsen and Seeck. But for one who held to

<sup>11</sup>*Loc. cit.* Cf. Gallo 1990: 118.

<sup>12</sup>Mommsen 1883: 208: "Kaum ist je eine Monographie mit gleicher Vernachlässigung der Spezialuntersuchung geschrieben und eine Fahrt ins Blaue der Wissenschaft mit gleich leichtem Gepäck angetreten worden."

the statistical method as Beloch did, von Pöhlmann's work on the overpopulation of the great cities of antiquity was a negligible work. Beloch's opinion of *Die Überbevölkerung der antiken Großstädte* appeared in 1887 in characteristically colorful terms: scholarship would have fared much better "had the author not confined himself to going round and round the same problem, like a cat around its bowl."<sup>13</sup> Von Pöhlmann was cast henceforth as the anti-Beloch demographer in Germany.

Eduard Meyer's appreciation of Beloch's *Bevölkerung* of 1886 was almost the only support that Beloch had in Germany until the papyrologists took note of his early and enthusiastic interest in their work. In his book the documents that were to emerge for demographic studies were not yet available, but Ulrich Wilcken's *Griechische Ostraka aus Aegypten und Nubien* immediately attracted Beloch's attention when it appeared in 1899. In an important review he explored the value of the new material for the demography of Egypt.<sup>14</sup> In subsequent work on the Hellenistic monarchies his debt to papyrological documentation is unmistakable and important. Through his prompt recognition of the usefulness of ostraca and papyri for demographic and historical studies Beloch became a pioneer once again, and it was therefore fitting that the only occasion on which he was actually offered a chair in Germany, well after Mommsen's death, was in Leipzig in succession to Wilcken. Beloch taught for two semesters in Leipzig, from 1912–13, but by then it became clear that his home was irrevocably in Italy, and his American wife let him know that she had no desire to live in Germany.

Despite other major projects, including his well-known *Greek History*, Beloch persevered with his demographic researches. When he died in 1929 he left behind materials for three volumes of his *Bevölkerungsgeschichte Italiens*, published posthumously between 1937 and 1965. Beloch had intended this to be only a part of a *Bevölkerungsgeschichte Europas*. The dyspeptic tone of the essays that comprise his volume of 1926 entitled, somewhat misleadingly, *Römische Geschichte*, reflects the undying resentment he felt over the treatment that Mommsen, Seeck, Wilamowitz and others had unremittingly meted out to him.

Sharp criticism was now coming to him from the Italian side as well. The historian Ettore Ciccotti had begun his work under the inspiration of Beloch and with his support. But in the jungle of Italian academic politics, in which Ciccotti lost to De Sanctis in several professorial *concorsi*, Ciccotti subsequently

<sup>13</sup>Beloch 1897: 335 n. 1.

<sup>14</sup>Beloch 1900: 33–36.

emerged as a champion of von Pöhlmann's study on the overpopulation of cities, and he adopted an overtly Marxist agenda.<sup>15</sup> He denounced Beloch's demographic method for its conjectural statistics and demanded a qualitative rather than quantitative approach to population analysis. He tried to place himself squarely in the tradition of humanistic analysis represented by David Hume's essay of 1752 *On the Populousness of Ancient Nations*, and, cloaked in the mantle of the long-dead and wholly innocent eighteenth-century philosopher, he repudiated all that was new and fertile in Beloch.

With the cattle mooing loudly now in Italy as well as in Germany, Beloch's polemical tone was even transferred to those who were not conspicuous partisans in the struggle over demographic method, notably to Friedrich Münzer, whose prosopographical study of the Roman nobility (*Römische Adelsparteien und Adelsfamilien*)—another highly innovative work—might have been expected to impress Beloch. His ungenerous response to Münzer's work may have been simply another ugly expression of his anti-Semitism, and Münzer's dignified and generous review of Beloch's *Römische Geschichte* in *Gnomon* revealed a decency that was all too infrequent on both sides in the debates involving Beloch.<sup>16</sup> But Beloch's obtuseness may equally have been the result of his own incomprehension of another new ancillary discipline that was as important, in its way, as his own discovery.

Unfortunately nature rarely endows one pioneer with sympathy for another. The savage intolerance that greeted Beloch's achievement in Germany was not much different from the intolerance that Beloch himself showed for Münzer's. In an even more extreme instance of incomprehension Beloch poured scorn on the highly original work of Jacob Burckhardt on Greek cultural history, and in denouncing this great historian Beloch joined forces, probably for the only time in his life, with Mommsen and Wilamowitz. Of Burckhardt's *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* Wilamowitz declared notoriously, "As far as classical scholarship is concerned, it does not exist."<sup>17</sup>

Beloch's most powerful weapon in defending himself from his antagonists was ultimately not his polemic. It was his solid achievement in print, and his equally solid achievement in teaching. He trained a whole generation of Italian historians of the ancient world, who assumed a position of international leadership when Mommsen and his disciples departed from the scene. The most famous of the Italian pupils of Beloch was Gaetano De Sanctis, but there were

<sup>15</sup>Gallo 1990: 123–27 has an important discussion of *questa singola figura di studioso*.

<sup>16</sup>Münzer 1927.

<sup>17</sup>Beloch 1899. Wilamowitz 1899: II, 7.

many others including Breccia, Cardinali, and the great philologist Pasquali. Beloch and his pupils created a school of social and economic history that was to form an indispensable background for the mighty works of Rostovtzeff.

It is appropriate that the revaluation of Beloch's achievement, represented by Brunt and his anglophone colleagues, should have been taken up first by an Italian, Arnaldo Momigliano, who, as a pupil of Gaetano De Sanctis, stood in direct line of succession to Beloch. His contribution of 1966 to the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* remains today perhaps the most perceptive overall assessment of Beloch's career. In recent years Momigliano's compatriots, organized by Leandro Polverini, have systematically and sympathetically investigated Beloch's work throughout the whole range of ancient history that he controlled. In a volume edited by Polverini and containing the papers of a conference held in 1986 at Perugia on *Aspetti della storiografia di Giulio Beloch*, there are significantly only two chapters in German, one by a Swiss and the other by Karl Christ (who has devoted much of his later career to the careful study of the writing of Roman history in Germany in modern times).

But ironically it had been a German who foresaw the fruit that would follow from all that Beloch had sown. At his death in 1929 Ulrich Kahrstedt, perhaps the only German of the younger generation to be directly inspired by Beloch's work, wrote a memorial of him for the *Nachrichten* of the Göttingen Academy of Sciences. There Kahrstedt predicted, "If ever a future scholar should describe the history of the rise of Italian classical scholarship and, regrettably, of the decline of German historiography and its collapse into the juggling of ideas and opinions, Beloch will be depicted as the cornerstone and his Roman students as the lofty level from which the Germans have slipped down and to which the Italians have ascended."<sup>18</sup> Kahrstedt's words were hardly generous towards his German colleagues, but there is, as most would acknowledge today, much truth in them. They constitute a kind of benediction after the struggles in which Beloch spent his life. The controversy has indeed borne fruit, but it is well to be reminded that the roots of fruit-bearing plants lie in dirt.

<sup>18</sup>Kahrstedt 1928/29.

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