

An introduction to the volume in honour of Peter Laslett

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The remarkable story of Peter Laslett's life has multiple and various facets. As well as being a distinguished historian, philosopher, demographer and gerontologist, he was, above all, an enthusiastic and energetic person, with a love of action, with great imagination, full of original and provocative ideas which he knew how to share, to communicate and to broadcast in a masterly way. He was a pioneer in several fields. Laslett had the virtue of putting into practice in his work as a social scientist, what, for Aristotle, was the true meaning of philosophy: the complete and coherent vision of all knowledge and experience.

His academic life could be summarised in the following sketch. Thomas Peter Ruffell was born on the 18th of December 1915, during the First World War. He was the son of a Baptist minister in Watford. In 1935 he went from Watford Grammar School to St John's College, Cambridge, to read History, where later he was elected to a fellowship between 1948 and 1951. Afterwards, he was University Lecturer in History and Reader in Politics and the History of Social Structure at the University of Cambridge between 1953 until 1983, where he was mentor of the Prince of Wales, among others. He was part of a group of historians that included Sir Moses Finley, Sir Geoffrey Elton, and Sir John Plumb, who made the Faculty of History at the University of Cambridge an extremely exciting place during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1953, he was elected Fellow of Trinity College, a position that he held until his death. In 1964, in collaboration with Sir Anthony Wrigley, and

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thanks to the generous economic support of the philanthropist Paul Mellon, he founded the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure of which he became Director of one of the most internationally recognized research groups on population history and social structure. In an interview,² Peter Laslett confessed that the support offered by Mellon gave them security in a moment of confrontation with different members of the faculty of history (mostly Geoffrey Elton and Kitson Clark), who considered family history and population history as a work which was only worthy of being carried out by amateurs, was parochial and of low interest to historians.

The opposition came not only because they went into the study, in Geoffrey Elton words, of «emotional relationships», but also because of the innovative use of statistics and informatics, during a period in which both tools were not in common use between contemporary historians. Peter Laslett criticized those traditional historians, mainly political historians, saying that «it is quite unlikely that a traditional historian could be familiar with numbers, because it seems that they have been elected more on the basis of mathematical incapability than of skilfulness with numbers. This classifies traditional historians together with the majority of the rest of erudite humanists, and gives an answer to why it is useless the dispute over if history could be quantified (...). The historian prefers the impressionist explanation, the typical examples, literary illustration. Social Science will not be properly useful if it is not compared with all exactitude and with all possible precision. «This implies numbers and mathematics» (Laslett, 1974: 30).³

Apart from his academic life in Cambridge, Laslett did many other things. During the Second World War he served, firstly, as a sailor in one of the British destroyers patrolling the North Atlantic and which escorted Russian convoys in the dangerous route between Murmansk and Great Britain. Afterwards, he was called to the famous Bletchley Park, the main British intelligence Centre during that time, comprising mainly of historians. Here he specialized in Japanese naval intelligence, after learning Japanese in one year, and working as a code breaker. During that time he reached the rank of Lieutenant. Finally, he was

2 CAM Magazine. 2000.

3 Similar comments could be found in Laslett, P. (1999), «Signifying nothing: traditional history, local history, statistics and computing», *History and Computing*, 11 (1 and 2), 129-134.

sent to Washington, where he met his wife Janet, and later on to San Diego. Once the Second World War was finished, he was, from 1946 until 1960, producer and presenter of the prestigious *Third Programme*, a BBC service which he considered The Envy of the World.⁴ In 1962, he was elected President of the *Viewers and Listeners Association of Great Britain*. It was during this period of time, in the *Third Programme*, in January 1966, that Tony Wrigley took the opportunity to talk about how little was known of the population of England in the pre-census era, and about the importance of our acquiring such knowledge, for an understanding of the history of the country. He went on to describe how evidence necessary to write the population history of England and Wales was contained in roughly 10000 parish registers, which had been kept, more or less intact, since Henry VIII had ordered the vicars to register the baptism, marriages and burials in 1538. But the main purpose of his talk was to encourage listeners to work on the collection of vital events (baptisms, marriages and burials) and to recruit an *army* of people to work on one or two parishes each. The response to this call was a complete success, far more generous than had been expected, and an army of 700 to 800 volunteered to carry that task («*le secret weapon anglais*» as Louis Henry described them). Therefore, a total of 530 parishes around England and Wales were collected and finally 404 parishes used, in a sample covering 1541 to 1871.⁵ Of these, 26 parishes have records good enough for «family reconstitution», a technique Tony Wrigley pioneered to track detailed parameters like family size, age at marriage, and child and infant mortality. With this great achievement, with the construction of a big database on the population history of England and Wales (which served for the publication of several books by members of the *Cambridge Group*, plus the arrival of Roger Schofield to the *Group*, which was at the time directed by Peter Laslett and Tony Wrigley) there was more of an impetus for the idea of using, as a basic tools for the analysis in historical studies, informatics and statistics. The publication of Wrigley and Schofield's massive final publication in 1981, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871*, dedicated «to the local

4 For more on this see: Carpenter, H. (1997) *The Envy of the World. Fifty Years of the BBC Third Program and Radio 3, 1946-1996*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London.

5 For a more detailed information see: Schofield, R. S. (1998) «Through a Glass Darkly», *Social Science History*, 22:2, 117-130; and Schofield, R. S. (1999) «History, computing and the emergence of the population history of England, 1541-1871: A reconstitution», *History and Computing*, 11 (1 and 2), 79-102.

population historians of England»,⁶ and later on the Wrigley, Davies, Oeppen and Schofield's, *English Population History from family reconstitution: 1580-1837* (1997)⁷ are good examples of the results of such an achievement.

During those years, Peter Laslett put into practice other innovative ideas. Peter, a firm defender of an open education for everyone, decided with his friend Lord Young, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, to found a second university in Cambridge on the same site, which would be in session when members of the existent university were on vacation.⁸ But this idea encountered enormous opposition. It was clear for them, that it was necessary to create a University of the Air, open for everyone, a mixture of television, open-circuit sound broadcasting, closed-circuit recording, correspondence and teaching. They wanted broadcasting because it would be an immediate, completely transparent available source of instruction to every citizen with a wireless or television set.⁹ The idea was to break the monopoly of universities, and broadcasting was clearly the manner of doing so. For the new project, Peter visited the United States in 1961 to look at educational television and went on to found the National Extension College, a pilot project of what was to become the *Open University*, precedent of the *Spanish Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia* (UNED). The classes, organized by a group of professors from the *University of Cambridge*, were first broadcast by *Anglia Television* in the autumn of 1963. Some years later, during the 1970s, Peter Laslett and Michael Young, repeated the same experience and in 1982 they founded the *University of the Third Age* (U3A) of which there are around 500 in the United Kingdom.

The most important of Peter Laslett's contributions to humanities and social sciences came from two different fields: philosophy and historical sociology, disciplines that he managed to join as no one had before. He achieved a logical unity in which the philosophical discourse (which mainly focused on the study of patriarchal authority in families,

6 Wrigley, E. A. and Schofield, R. S. (1981) *The Population History of England, 1541-1871*, Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past times. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

7 Wrigley, E. A.; Davies, R. S.; Oeppen, J. and Schofield, R. S. (1997), *English Population History from family reconstitution: 1580-1837*, Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past times. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

8 See Michael Young on Peter Laslett, *The Guardian*, 17th November, 2001.

9 Carpenter, H. (1997)

described at that time as extended families by authors such as Sir Robert Filmer) gave way to the study of social structure and, particularly, the study of family structures. As a political philosopher, his most important contributions came from the study of John Locke and Sir Robert Filmer, which appeared, among other works, in his edition of Filmer's *Patriarcha* (1949) and, over all, his commented edition of John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1960). This is widely recognised as one of the classic pieces of recent scholarship in the history of ideas and established a land mark in the study of the English philosopher. As Peter Laslett wrote in his introduction to Filmer's *Patriarcha*, its value as a historical document consists primarily in its revelation of the strength and persistence in European culture of the patriarchal family form, which is marked by the supremacy of the father, the inferiority of women, rules of primogeniture, and also for his description of the patriarchal family which came down to Filmer as one of the stablest features of European culture. For Filmer, the seventeenth-century patriarchal family, moreover, had many of the features of the patriarchal household. It included not only wife and children, but often younger brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces: male superiority and primogeniture were unquestioned. More striking was the presence of a very large number of servants, whose subjection to the head of the household was as absolute and unquestioned as that of the infant heir. The size of the household varied with the wealth, importance and profession of its master (Laslett, 1949: 21-25). Filmer's description of the family in the seventeenth-century caught Peter Laslett's attention, and he tried in his subsequent studies to check if the composition and form of the households at that time corresponded with what was described by the English philosopher. Richard Smith, actual Director of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, has written recently that it was in April 1960 when Laslett «gave three *Third Programme* talks about the social order before the coming of industry. One of these programmes concerned the family as a social unit. He had just stumbled across *The Rector's Book, Clayworth, Notts* (1910) which contained two «censuses» of a Nottinghamshire village's inhabitants in the late seventeenth century. These showed patterns of family co-residence and population turnover that bore little relationship to the prescriptions embodied in Filmer's 1680 *Patriarcha* - large kin-enfolding extended families»,¹⁰ and he took from that a line of research which was lately very fruitful.

10 Smith, R. *The independent*, 25 November 2001.

His work on the philosopher John Locke began on his arrival in Cambridge. As he said: «I needed to make myself respectable, so I took up Locke». Certainly, his passion for collecting antique books led him to have the good luck of finding the private library of the English philosopher John Locke – a library that had been purchased by his close friend Paul Mellon and then given to the Bodleian Library of Oxford University. The opportunity of having the personal writings of the philosopher, his correspondence, and his favourite readings, made the task of undertaking the critical edition of Locke's work much easier. Finally, also in the field of political philosophy and following the model established by Professor Flew in the series «Logic and Language», in 1946 he founded and began editing the series «Philosophy, Politics and Society.»

But perhaps his greatest influence is shown in his work and contributions to historical sociology and, specifically, in the area of the history of the family and the history of population. As previously mentioned, he was, at the same time as Robert Fogel, one of the pioneers and tireless defenders of statistical analysis and computer information technology in the study of history. And mostly, he published in 1965 a very influential book which also had a great impact, *The world we have lost: English society before the coming of industry* (1965) – title of the book which brought together two key ideas: the world that we regret losing, and the world that we are happy to have left behind –. It was there that he launched a frontal assault on the then-dominant ideas in the literature found in history and social sciences on social change. In it is argued that the size and form of families have not changed significantly over time and that the nuclear family was already the norm by the 16th century, thereby destroying the myth propagated by Robert Filmer and upheld by many others.

It is to a second era to which belong his works dedicated to the study of household formation. Laslett, in cooperation with an assiduous visiting scholar from the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure – John Hajnal, the famous demographer from the London School of Economics – began to offer new ideas on the processes of household formation in Northern and Western Europe in the pre-industrial era. Peter Laslett was a pioneer in the use of micro-simulation in the study of family structures of the past that served him in his empirical analysis of the classification and structure of households, which was recently stressed by Richard Smith and who is considered a link to one of his heroes of the application of statistical methods in social analysis – Gregory King.

Books such as *Household and Family in Past Time* (1972), which Laslett wrote in collaboration with Richard Wall, and *Family Forms in Historic Europe* (1983) that he wrote in collaboration with Richard Wall and Jean Robin, belong to this second era. The methodology used in the first of these two works has been amply used and imitated throughout the world and its results amply criticised; but it has not ceased to be one of the milestones in the literature of the history of the family. Peter Laslett also dedicated part of this second period to the study of illegitimacy, from which emerged his works *Family life and illicit love in earlier generations* (1977), and *Bastardy and its comparative history* (1980) in collaboration with Karla Oosterveen and Richard Smith. As he said, family is a well-known and organised structure that is based on regularity; a good example of the breaking of this regularity is illegitimacy, while the relationship with the means of subsistence and population control is obvious.

During the 1980's, his interest was drawn toward the study of ageing, the Third and the Forth age, where he also fought against the idea that persons of advanced age should be marginalised and not taken into account in decision-making. For him, Third age was the arrival to a time of complete personal development; while Forth age it is those of advanced age who fulfil the stereotype of ageing: physical decline and a phase of dependence and decrepitude. A splendid example of this productive phase are the books by Peter Laslett, *Justice between age groups and generations* (1992) in collaboration with James S. Fishkin, and, mainly, *A fresh map of Life* (1989) in which he offers his optimistic perspective, full of the energy he gained from life.

Peter Laslett was accustomed to saying that Cambridge was a paradise. Without a doubt, in Cambridge were brought together many things that he appreciated. His moments lost in caring for the yard at his home, which retained hints of a farming land and that he liked to think was well-cared for but a little bit wild. The stand of trees which reminds him of those that Locke had at the entrance to his home. His jaunts on bicycle, and coffee in the morning with the Cambridge Group, where always he was the center of attention and where he always tried to engage in conversation with whatever new visitor happened to be there.

Laslett always showed a great curiosity in the work of other people, especially those who did not share the same line of research, while he always offered his support and encouragement. He was, without a doubt,

the charismatic and warm person that all visitors to the Group wanted to get to know. He also loved art and liked to visit the Fitzwilliam Museum or any other art gallery in Cambridge or nearby London, and also took trips to visit churches and monuments and admire the architectural works that he so admired. During his afternoons at Trinity College he would take his tea in his office where he was surrounded by the works of his favourite authors and could fix his gaze at portraits of Locke and Filmer. Cambridge afforded him the opportunity to engage in conversation with researchers from other disciplines and provided him opportunity to fill-in his already extensive knowledge and therefore satisfy one of his ambitions: to be able to bring together diverse disciplines towards one goal, that of acquiring the complete and coherent vision of all knowledge and experience.

It is not surprising then that a group of friends and colleagues joined together to produce a collective publication in honour of Laslett's work as a researcher and as a person. In this volume, are brought together works written by scholars from around the world: from Japan to Spain, from Finland to Australia, from Hungary or from England itself, who have tried in their articles to cover the main areas of research in which Peter Laslett laboured throughout his life. The last phase is well represented by David Thomson and his article «Ageing, Work and Retirement – longer lives and less work?», and by Richard Wall in «The contribution of the Poor Law in England towards alleviating the economic inequality of the elderly at the end of the eighteenth century». It then passes on to works directed at one of his most prominent areas of research, the history of the family, such as «Computer microsimulation and historical study of social structure: A comparative review of SOCSIM and CAMSIM» by Zhongwei Zhao; Pier Paolo Viazzo's «The self-sufficient household? An anthropological reconsideration of the Italian evidence», Tamás Faragó on «Life cycles and family models in a Hungarian town in the 18th and 19th centuries», and «The death of a partner, remarriage and family continuation in Tokugawa Japan: a village study» by Osamu Saito and Kiyoshi Hamano. Finally, in his «Impact of Mill's *The Subjection of Women* on the Scandinavian 'modern breakthrough' in the 1870s and 1880s», Kirsi Warpula deals with issues with which Peter Laslett dealt from his earliest years as a researcher. The book opens with an introduction by the current director of the Cambridge Group for the History of the Population and Social Structure, Richard Smith, and closes with an epilogue by David Reher who writes about Laslett's impact on the study of family history in Spain.

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