

Johann Peter SÜSSMILCH

b. 3 September 1707 - d. 22 March 1767

Summary. Pastor Süßmilch was the German ancestor of demographic statistics.

The life and career of Johann Peter Süßmilch, minister of St. Peter's church in Berlin-Kölln, were closely related to religious currents in Prussia during the 18th century. A churchman of strict evangelical allegiance, he rose in the hierarchy of the Lutheran church, while at the same time developing his scientific opus as a demographic statistician. He has gradually acquired an international reputation which is well deserved. One may well ask to what an extent he was a representative of the "Aufklärung" (Enlightenment), and how much his researches were inspired by his faith as a man of God.

Süßmilch was born in Zehlendorf near Berlin. His father Elias Süßmilch had travelled in France, England, the Netherlands and most of the German states; he spoke several living languages, but having become a brewer, he devoted himself to his business. It was his maternal grandfather Peter Blell, who probably played the most important role in the development of the future author of *Die göttliche Ordnung (The Divine Order)*. Süßmilch spent his earliest years in Brandenburg-am-Havel, with his grandfather, who gave him the rudiments of education and enrolled him in the Neustädtische Gymnasium directed by the pietist¹ Caspar Gottschling, who was very close to August Hermann Francke, the inspirer of the pietist movement.

In 1716, Süßmilch studied at the "Grey Cloister" Gymnasium in Berlin; one of his teachers was the co-rector Johann Leonhard Frisch, philologist, naturalist, member of the Academy of Sciences, correspondent of Leibniz and disciple of Philipp Jacob Spener, founder of Berlin pietism. In an autobiographical sketch which appeared shortly before his death, Süßmilch thanked Frisch for awakening his interest in the observation of nature, as a manifestation of God's works. These two forms of knowledge, knowledge of the Creator, and knowledge of his creatures remained indissolubly connected in the works of the minister.

Süßmilch was attracted by medicine, and attended the *Theatrum Anatomicum*, reorganized by Friedrich-Wilhelm I; he successfully passed an examination in

¹Pietism was a reform movement in the German Lutheran Church during the 17th and 18th centuries, designed to renew the devotional ideal of Protestantism.

osteology in 1724. But his parents preferred law, and were rather discouraging about their son's medical vocation, so that he gave it up; nevertheless, his work bears the traces of this "repression" of his natural interests. Medicine was replaced by another passion: for it was at this stage that Süssmilch met the Berlin minister Michael Roloff, his first mentor in theology.

Somewhat reluctant to study law, Süssmilch left for Halle, a centre of pietism, in 1727. He became personally involved with Francke, pursued theological studies and made up his deficiency in oriental languages, particularly Hebrew. His education continued in Jena: Süssmilch familiarized himself with Wolffian philosophy, and defended a thesis on the cohesion of physical bodies under the direction of the medical doctor Georg Erhard Hamberger.

Although his time in Jena was of great importance in his scientific development, Süssmilch did not abandon the pietist influences of his childhood and of Halle. From 1728 to 1730, the future minister frequented a community of Herrnhüter ², and became involved in teaching and evangelising the poor. It was because of his ties with the pietist circle that he became, through Roloff, the tutor of one of Marshal Christoph von Kalckstein's sons, the Marshal being a familiar of the Court.

After this appointment, Süssmilch's career was secure. In 1736, he became chaplain to the von Kalckstein regiment; it was he who preached the last sermon attended by the dying Friedrich-Wilhelm I. He was appointed to the parish of Etzin, took part in the first Silesian war, and in 1742, against the wishes of Friedrich II who had finally rallied to the evangelical cause, became Pastor Primarius of St. Peter.

Meanwhile, in 1741, Süssmilch had published the first version of his major work *Die göttliche Ordnung in den Veränderungen des menschlichen Geschlechts, aus der Geburt, Tod, und Fortpflanzung desselben erwiesen* (*The Divine Order in the Changes of the Human Species, as Demonstrated by its Birth, Death and Propagation*).

In this work, Süssmilch declared himself explicitly a follower of English physico-theology, more specifically of William Derham, the author of *Physico-Theology* (1713). The entire training and development of Süssmilch effectively led him to uphold the traditional argument on Divine Providence, and the incontestability of the Divine Word as revealed by Scripture. He

²The name Herrnhüter is derived from Herrnhut, a village whose name means "Guardian of the Lord." It was here that the first community of Herrnhuters, a pietistic group, was founded by von Zingendorf.

sought to demonstrate through a careful examination of empirical data, that the laws governing humanity were as formal and undeniable as those of Newtonian mechanics. Thus, three major currents of thought of 18th century Europe combined in the minister's work: Lutheran faith coloured by pietism, Anglo-Dutch physio-theology born of Newtonian philosophy and demographic statistics. Süssmilch was fully aware of his predecessors in statistical research, and his concerns were never far removed from those of the "political arithmeticians". But he was not an innovator; rather he was a compiler. The publication of *Die göttliche Ordnung* resulted in the author's election to the Prussian Academy of Sciences. He contributed regularly to the activities of this learned society. The Memoirs which he read there, some of which were published, revealed his three interests: history, linguistics and demographic statistics. For Süssmilch, it was clear that these three areas of knowledge sprang from a single idea: God ruled over the world through the hand of His Providence.

The minister indulged in some polemics, launched into some business deals such as the Berlin-Potsdam-Berlin stagecoach, and a plantation of mulberry trees in Friedrichshagen, and he became a censor. Armed with his numerical data, of which he could never have enough, he tried to act as a private councillor to Friedrich II on questions of population. This was vain, for the king ignored his "reprimands" and Süssmilch had to content himself with ecclesiastical preferment, first becoming inspector of parishes, then *Konsistorialrat*³.

But the statistician in him never lost sight of his magnum opus. He continued to collect data and gathered his academic contributions to publish, 20 years after its first edition, a corrected and considerably augmented second edition of *Die göttliche Ordnung* in 1761-62. This work is a vast compendium of demographic data, socio-economic analyses, and polemics against the great thinkers of the day, among them Montesquieu. While maintaining the essence of his fundamental theses, this rich compilation, even more than his youthful work, can be thought of as the illustration of the divine commandment: Increase and Multiply. For Süssmilch the peopling of the earth was one of the realisations of the Divine Goal for man, God's privileged creature. The minister had himself contributed to this goal with his wife Charlotte Dorothea Lieberkühn, whom he had married in 1737, by fathering 10 children, of whom 9 survived, a remarkable feat for that period.

³Councillor of the Higher Consistory of his Church.

The last published work of Süßmilch in 1766 (he died within a year) was the important *Versuch eines Beweises, dass die erste Sprache ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe*. (*Essay on the Proof that the First Language did not Originate with Man, but with God Alone*). Three years before, the minister had suffered a stroke and was half paralyzed. A third edition of *Die göttliche Ordnung* similar to the second had been published in 1765. Eleven years later, in 1776, Süßmilch's nephew by marriage, Christian Jacob Baumann, published the book again, with a number of "additions and complements" in which he made use of the minister's data in a somewhat idiosyncratic fashion.

While he never made any discoveries in the area of statistical method, Süßmilch, by bringing together the most extensive set of available data of his time, was known in his lifetime to German speaking Europeans, and in particular recognized by the Dutchman Struyck and the Swede Wargentin, both important figures in the history of demographic statistics. *Die göttliche Ordnung* of 1761-62, translated into Dutch in 1770, discussed in England, tolerably well known and respected in Germany, where Süßmilch may be justly regarded as the father of demographic statistics, was translated in part and published in France by Jacqueline Hecht of the Institut National d'Études Démographiques (INED) in 1978. The appearance in 1998 of an annotated edition with commentaries of this opus princeps of 1741, extends her effort, so essential to the history of demography and statistics, of which Süßmilch was undoubtedly one of the main founders.

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