



# The Power of Large Numbers: Population, Politics, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century France

*Joshua Cole*

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French government officials have long been known among Europeans for the special attention they give to the state of their population. In the first half of the nineteenth century, as Paris doubled in size and twice suffered the convulsions of popular revolution, civic leaders looked with alarm at what they deemed a dangerous population explosion. After defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, however, the falling birthrate generated widespread fears of cultural and national decline. In response, legislators promoted larger families and the view that a well-regulated family life was essential for France. In this innovative work of cultural history, Joshua Cole examines the course of French thinking and policymaking on population issues from the 1780s until the outbreak of the Great War. During these decades increasingly sophisticated statistical methods for describing and analyzing such topics as fertility, family size, and longevity made new kinds of aggregate knowledge available to social scientists and government officials. Cole recounts how this information heavily influenced the outcome of debates over the scope and range of public welfare legislation. In particular, as the fear of depopulation grew, the state wielded statistical data to justify increasing intervention in family life and continued restrictions on the autonomy of women.

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