

MASSIMO LIVI BACCI

# A History of Italian Fertility During the Last Two Centuries



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## A HISTORY OF ITALIAN FERTILITY

This book is the third in a series on the decline of European fertility published for the Office of Population Research, Princeton University.

A History  
of Italian Fertility  
During the Last Two Centuries

BY MASSIMO LIVI-BACCI

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## Foreword

About ten years ago Massimo Livi-Bacci committed part of his time and energy to collaboration in an ambitious demographic research project centered at the Office of Population Research in Princeton. The purpose of this project is to document and analyze the extensive reduction in human fertility that has been experienced in the past century or so in virtually every large geographic subdivision of every country in Europe. Although the occurrence of a decline has been practically universal, the time of its initiation and the pace at which it developed has been quite varied—birth rates were falling as early as the end of the eighteenth century in parts of France, and as late as the mid-twentieth century in Albania.

The conditions under which women begin to bear fewer children is a subject of great interest today; one of the most readily accepted ideas at the World Population Conference in Bucharest in 1974 is the belief in a virtually automatic reduction in fertility.

It is hoped that the books that emerge from this project will be valuable in two ways: in providing the quantitative history of a profound social change in each country (the decline in fertility itself), and as a contribution to better general knowledge of the circumstances under which women begin to bear fewer children. This project was originally supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Science Foundation. In recent years, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development has provided the bulk of the support, including Professor Livi-Bacci's research on Italian fertility.

Professor Livi-Bacci was the author of the first book to be published in the series presenting the results of the European Fertility Project—*A Century of Portuguese Fertility*, published in 1971. He has also written several articles on trends in fertility in Spain since the late eighteenth century. In this book he presents a detailed account and careful analysis of the varied experience in Italy. He includes, as background for the modern experience of falling birth rates since the unification of Italy in 1861, an examination of old records from fifteenth-century Florence and eighteenth-century cities in the south of Italy. (These records show that the number of surviving children per family was *positively* associated with income in these populations—a relation, the author speculates,

## FOREWORD

that was reversed during the modern transition to low fertility, but may be restored when the practice of birth control becomes virtually universal.) The greater part of the book, however, is devoted to a presentation and analysis of the history of fertility since 1861, since which date, population records have included periodic censuses and virtually complete registration of births and deaths. The presentation includes maps, figures, and tables showing the evolution of fertility in considerable geographic detail for the century after unification.

The author has also examined the occasional Italian records that provide evidence on the number of children born to couples in different social and economic categories, as well as the more generally available evidence on geographic differences. He finds that some groups—Italian Jews, for one example, and titled families, for another—had reduced their fertility even before the nineteenth century. Certain categories of government employees for whom fertility information is fortuitously preserved had lower fertility by the mid-nineteenth century than the general population.

It is true that fertility is lower than in the past in all very highly modernized societies. As Professor Livi-Bacci once remarked, city apartment dwellers who have telephones, automobiles, and television sets do not have eight children. However, the existence of a simple relation between readily identified features of development and reduced fertility is challenged by the experience of sustained high fertility in countries that have enjoyed substantial social and economic progress (such as Mexico and the Central Asian Republics of the Soviet Union), and the reduction of fertility in areas that remain rural, not generally literate, and subject to high mortality (such as Bulgaria in the 1920s). The unparalleled detail and completeness of European demographic statistics provide the opportunity to examine the circumstances under which fertility declined in a large number of geographic areas (more than 700 provinces) with diverse cultures and economic conditions—and diverse dates at which the trend in question was initiated. The project includes separate studies of a number of countries, some conducted by demographers on the staff at the Office of Population Research, and some (as in this instance) by cooperating experts at universities or research centers in Europe or America.

His colleagues on the European Fertility Project and at the Office of Population Research will in years to come recall with pleasure and

## FOREWORD

gratitude Professor Livi-Bacci's contribution to their ideas, during many hours of discussion and debate, and the permanent availability of his solid scholarship in the two books he has contributed to the project.

ANSLEY J. COALE

*Director*, Office of Population Research  
Princeton University





## Preface

This book on Italian fertility presents the results of research carried out during the last ten years. In 1965, I wrote an article in which the first data were presented and the first hypothesis was advanced on the fertility decline in Italy during the last century. In the following years, my research on the subject was abandoned and then resumed several times in a reflection of the strength of other competing interests and obligations. During the summers of 1965 and 1967, which were spent in Princeton at the Office of Population Research, I had the opportunity to discuss some of my plans as well as my first findings with colleagues in the European Fertility Project. It was only in 1973 that I started the actual writing of the book; it was completed in 1974 at Princeton during part of a sabbatical supported by the Population Council.

A particular debt of gratitude is owed to two persons. One is Ansley J. Coale, director of the project, with whom I have discussed practically every part of this book. The other is my father, the late Livio Livi, a demographer and social scientist who, through discussions and in other mysterious ways, passed on to me much of his vast knowledge of the Italian population.

My grateful thanks go also to my friends and colleagues of the Office of Population Research in Princeton and of the Dipartimento Statistico in Florence. Etienne van de Walle, Jane Menken, and Allan Hill in Princeton and Carlo Corsini and Antonio Santini in Florence helped me in various ways and at various stages of my work; all deserve my gratitude.

I had the courage to write this book in English, in spite of my limited command of the language. Patricia Taylor did her best to ensure conformity of my manuscript to the laws of the English language, although I am told that the Latin structure that pervaded the original text is still evident here and there. She also edited the text and the tables; in short, she transformed a poor manuscript into what I hope to be now an acceptable book. Ann Ryder patiently typed the more than one hundred tables that appear in the manuscript as well as the text itself; Richard Boscarino did the illustrations; and statistical checking was performed by Kirsten Yocom.

Finally, I have also the pleasure of acknowledging the financial help

## PREFACE

of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development,  
which has supported the overall work of the European Fertility Project  
and my specific research on Italy.

Massimo Livi-Bacci

Florence

November 1975

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## A HISTORY OF ITALIAN FERTILITY





## Introduction

This book deals with demographic change in Italy during the last two centuries, or, more precisely, with a particular aspect of demographic change: the decline of fertility.

Approximately 150 million Italian children were born between the beginning of the nineteenth century and 1961, the year that marked the centennial of Italian independence and unification. During this time span the demographic behavior of the Italian population, as of all European populations, radically changed. Women, once inexorably destined for marriage, frequent childbirth, and early onset of old age, have been freed from the tyranny of biological events. At the same time, death has become relatively less frequent and the life span has doubled; frequent mortality crises (from typhus, cholera, smallpox, or famine) have disappeared, with the tragic exception of war. Mobility has increased and people have emigrated from the country by the million. Internal migration has profoundly changed the pattern of settlement, depopulating the mountain and rural areas and inflating the urban ones.

With a few variants, this summary of the main aspects of demographic change could fit the description of the history of any European country during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The Italian population, therefore, is not a special case and fits very well in the general pattern of demographic change within European populations. So does the change of fertility, of course with its own peculiarities.

The birth rate of Italy started declining at the end of the nineteenth century, about a century later than that of France, a few decades later than that of other western European countries, and a few decades earlier than that of other Mediterranean populations. The timing of the decline is in agreement with the place and role of Italy in Europe and with her double soul, Continental and Mediterranean at the same time.

At the other end of the time scale, the same situation is reproduced. Low fertility, compatible with the pace and structure of modern times, was not reached until after World War II, a couple of decades later than in the other western countries, but well in advance of Spain and Portugal, where the transition to low levels of fertility had not yet come to an end. What is true of fertility, is true of many other indicators of social and economic development: the level of Italian education, income, and industrialization is behind that of western Europe and ahead of that of the Mediterranean countries. The last of the European countries and the

## INTRODUCTION

first of the Mediterranean ones, as a popular and abused expression used to say.

The detailed analysis of Italian fertility presented in this book does not modify the terms of the generalization concerning the place of Italy in the European demographic scene. But generalizations on the basis of superficial analogy and parallelism are extremely dangerous and often of little heuristic value in the social sciences. They do not help very much in determining casual factors and in assessing relationships between the various phenomena. Indeed, when the analysis uncovers the hidden aspects and patterns of change, the detailed features of territorial and class differences, and the varying correlates of the phenomena under study, then generalizations appear to be what they are: summaries, more or less correct, of past events rather than laws or models. This is also the lot of the theory of the demographic transition: a summary of demographic change over a given historical period and geographical area rather than the essence and the core of an articulate system of functional relationships empirically tested and proved. Even as a summary, the theory of the demographic transition has to allow for too many exceptions (why did the fertility decline start earlier in rural France than in industrial England?) to be convincing.

In the social sciences (and demography is no exception), the process of knowledge goes through steps and stages often in a dialectical sequence. Constants, regularities, and laws are too often the consequence of our inability, for lack of documentation or insufficiency of research, to know the facts with precision. For example, the hypothesis that fertility behavior was more or less uniform in predecline times, as a consequence of the lack of fertility control, has melted like snow under the sun in the light of a deeper and more methodical historical research, which has made evident an unsuspected variety of situations. New historical analysis helps in testing, and generally in destroying, generalizations (or theories) formulated at a lower level of knowledge. Then, of course, the need for a new systematic presentation of facts for new generalizations arises. The new theories may be similar, different, or complementary to the old ones, but they will never be identical because they are formulated at a higher level of knowledge. This book, along with the other monographs on European countries in the Princeton Fertility Project, tends precisely to fulfill this task. The aim is to test, dismantle, and possibly rebuild with more refined elements the accepted generalizations as to the modes, patterns, and factors of the secular process of fertility decline. But many difficulties stand in the way.

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First, there are several problems concerning the sources and the methods. We have to establish the facts: we have to analyze fertility change as precisely as possible and with detail. When possible, we have exploited the available statistical material with a uniform methodology that will ensure comparability with the results of the other studies conducted on other European countries. Of uniformity, however, we have not made a myth, and we have used a variety of measures and data every time this was helpful in establishing facts and testing hypotheses.

Second, there was the problem of choosing the historical limits of the investigation. The temptation was to start the analysis with 1861. This is the year of Italian unification and of the first national census; and, in practice, it marks the beginning of the national statistical system. At that time, fertility had not yet started to decline, at least at the national level, so that the process could be followed from the start with uniform data and uniform methodology. But, there were other, equally valid reasons to start at an earlier date: (1) the existence of a substantial body of statistical material and of a respectable volume of research for the first part of the nineteenth century: (2) the belief that the demographic history of modern Italy, and particularly the history of differential demographic change of the territorial areas, cannot be well understood without a precise knowledge of the character of the states before unification; and (3) the hypothesis, readily confirmed by our findings, that fertility decline, although starting at the national level in the 1890s, had already occurred in geographically and socially delimited areas well before unification.

To start systematically from the time of the Napoleonic hegemony over Europe and Italy (although we will frequently intrude into earlier historical periods) seems a just compromise; indeed, the Napoleonic times spread long lasting seeds of social change on a soil already made fertile by the age of Enlightenment and by reformism.

The third set of problems relates to the necessary links between demographic analysis and the analysis of the social, economic, and cultural changes in Italian society. We have dealt with this problem in a very empirical and unsystematic way, in part under the constraint of the lack of quantitative material, and in part as a consequence of the unsatisfactory state—theoretical and methodological—of the relationships between demography and the other social sciences. Although we have done our best to establish the links between demographic and social change, there is still ample ground for further research.

A fourth set of problems was posed by the need—deeply felt by the

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author—to link the results of demographic analysis with the pace and patterns of the cultural modifications in the Italian society. Unfortunately, we have done little more than acknowledge a need for a higher level of knowledge in this field. Fertility changes are the consequence of deliberate and conscious decisions taken at the individual level by couples. They imply complex modifications in the systems of preferences and values attached by individuals to the children and to the family. These preferences and values are part of a more general system involving the relations between individuals and between individuals and society. In this respect, we do not know very much about our contemporaries, but we know far less about our ancestors. The history of social psychology and the “*histoire des mentalités*” have a long way to go, and demographers have still to devise ways of taking advantage of their findings.

With the ambitions and limitations explained in these pages, this book is composed of seven substantive chapters. Chapter 1 examines the situation of the states from Napoleonic times to 1860. With the limitations of the material, we have tried to outline trends and differentials. Chapter 2 deals with the analysis, carried out with uniform methodology, of fertility and nuptiality trends of the regional populations from 1861 to 1961. Chapter 3 examines urban-rural differentials in fertility and nuptiality, and Chapter 4 is devoted to a detailed geographical analysis of fertility at the provincial level and, in some cases, for several hundred smaller administrative units. Chapter 5 consists of a multivariate analysis of the relations between fertility and a few indicators of the demographic, social, and economic characteristics of the provinces, from 1881 to 1961. In Chapter 6 we have studied differential fertility, trying to reconcile the different patterns of differential behavior before, during, and after the secular decline of fertility. Chapter 7 discusses several demographic, biological, and social factors that, although relevant to fertility, did not fit into the structure of the analysis in the preceding chapters. These factors are the role of breastfeeding and of other biological characteristics in determining the predecline levels of fertility as well as the territorial differentials; and the role of family structure, of emigration, and of the demographic policy of fascism in determining the differential pace of change in the various areas and sectors of the population. The main findings and conclusions of the book are reappraised in the final chapter, while the technicalities concerning the quality and the comparability of the data, as well as the reconstruction of comparable regional and provincial series, are contained in Appendixes A, B, and C.

# CHAPTER 1: From Napoleonic Times to National Unification

## 1.1 *Hypotheses and Facts*

The modern demographic history of the Italian state cannot begin before 1861, which was both the date of national unification and the year of the first national census. In the ensuing years, a methodical and continuous collection of vital statistics also started in the several thousand comuni that form the smallest administrative units of the country.

Before 1861, however, there is much of demographic interest: some of the events before 1861 have a direct bearing on Italy's demographic circumstances in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Although fertility only began to fall in Italy as a whole at the end of the nineteenth century, in some areas (notably Toscana, Piemonte, and Liguria) the decline started well before the end of the century and, in some instances, in the decade following unification. Moreover there is as yet no definite proof that the levels of fertility prevailing in the 1860s are not themselves the outcome of an earlier, perhaps slower, decline. For certain sectors of the population (such as religious minorities or social elites) the decline may have started well before unification without showing up in the aggregate data for the country as a whole, or for its regions or provinces.

The first chapter of the book, therefore, deals with fertility before unification, and exploits the large volume of published and unpublished material available for the half-century from Napoleonic times to 1861. This material, although invaluable, makes the application of sophisticated methodology and uniform systems of analysis impossible; the information originates from seven or eight politically independent states with primitive and changing procedures for gathering demographic statistics. Even after 1861, boundary changes complicate the analysis.

For the first five or six decades of the nineteenth century, the analysis is based on material of uneven completeness and quality. The main aim is to give some insight into the regional variability of fertility in pre-unification Italy and to search for urban-rural or social differentials that may carry through into the post-1861 period. The findings will at best indicate the possibilities for more systematic research among the dispersed, but rich, historical sources.

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### 1.2 *Organization of the Statistical Services and Nature of the Sources*

The first six decades of the nineteenth century may be roughly subdivided into two periods: the first, prior to 1815, marked by the direct or indirect influence of the Napoleonic Empire; the second, from 1815 to 1860, characterized by the return to the pre-Napoleonic situation and by the slow preparation for unification.<sup>1</sup> The French influence, important for so many aspects of the political, social, and cultural life of the Italian people, also affected the organization of the statistical system. The need for statistics and for quantitative and qualitative information concerning many aspects of demographic, economic, and social life was deeply felt by the authorities of the Empire, and the demand for data was continuous from the first years of the Consulate to the fall of Napoleon.<sup>2</sup> From 1800 on, several Italian regions fell under the direct rule first of the Republic and later of the Empire: Piemonte and Liguria, the Ducato di Parma, the Granducato di Toscana, and part of the Stato Pontificio (Umbria and Lazio); the remainder of Central and Northern Italy was organized under the Regno d'Italia (Kingdom of Italy), but the influence of the Empire was very strong and close. More than half the Italian population was, therefore, administered according to principles derived from the Code Napoleon. The existing statistical data make reference to the comuni and dipartimenti. The former was the traditional administrative subdivision, whereas the latter was altogether new to the Italian states. Of the rest of Italy, the largest part—the Regno di Napoli (Sicilia excluded)—fell under French political influence and participated, to a certain extent, in the administrative innovations introduced by the Code Napoleon.<sup>3</sup> Only the islands, Sicilia and Sardegna, remained untouched by innovation.

<sup>1</sup> For a historical outline of the development of the statistical organization from the Napoleonic times to unification, see U. Giusti, *Pagine di storia della statistica italiana: Dalla metà del secolo XVIII fino alla formazione del Regno*, in ISTAT, *Decennale*, Roma, 1936, pp. 5-18.

<sup>2</sup> C. Corsini, "Le migrazioni stagionali di lavoratori nei dipartimenti italiani nel periodo Napoleonico (1810-12)," in *Saggi di Demografia Storica*, Dipartimento Statistico Matematico, Firenze, 1969, pp. 98-101.

<sup>3</sup> R. Zangheri, *La popolazione Italiana in età Napoleonica*, Bologna, 1966, p. 4. The book is a useful guide to the demographic sources of the Napoleonic times. See also, E. Sonnino, "Le rilevazioni demografiche di stato in periodo napoleonico e postnapoleonico fino all'unificazione," in Comitato Italiano per lo Studio della Demografia Storica, *Le fonti della demografia storica in Italia*, Roma, 1973.

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The French influence marks an innovation from the point of view of statistics for three reasons:

- (1) because the civil authorities are substituted for the clergy in the responsibility for data collection
- (2) because the curiosity of the ruler is not satisfied by the mere collection of data on population, births, deaths, and marriages, but demands information concerning pauperism, migration, health, criminality, and many other aspects of social life
- (3) because a new dimension and scope is given to statistical surveys, which, earlier, were restricted to the narrow limits of the parish, the diocese, or, at most, the state, but now are referred to new, broader political areas.

With the Restoration in 1815, the prerogatives of the clergy in the collection of vital data were restored, and remained more or less untouched until unification. But the Napoleonic influence was not lost. In some of the states, most notably Regno di Sardegna and Granducato di Toscana, centralized systems for data collection, and in some instances for their publication and analysis, were set up. In Toscana, beginning in 1817, a centralized bureau (*Ufficio di Stato Civile*) was organized, to which copies of the individual records of birth, death, and marriage were transmitted monthly by the parishes (about 2500 in number) of the Granducato.<sup>4</sup> The individual records for the period 1808–1865 are kept in Firenze's National Archive.

In Piemonte, a Central Commission for Statistics was created in 1836 and for several years issued directives for the collection and elaboration of demographic data. This Commission supervised the three censuses of 1838, 1848, and 1858 and their publication, and also ordered several surveys in the field of demographic statistics. A few important publications testify to this activity.<sup>5</sup> In Lombardia and Veneto, the Austrian administration continued the brilliant statistical tradition initiated in Lombardia in the eighteenth century, and population and vital statistics were collected annually for the various administrative areas and trans-

<sup>4</sup> A. Zuccagni-Orlandini, *Ricerche Statistiche del Granducato di Toscana*, Firenze, 1848, I: 489.

<sup>5</sup> *Informazioni Statistiche raccolte dalla Regia Commissione Superiore per gli Stati di S. M. in Terraferma*, Torino, Vol. I, 1839 (1838 Census); Vol. II, 1843 (vital statistics 1828-1837); Vol. III, 1847 and Vol. IV, 1849 (medical statistics); Vol. V, 1852 (1848 Census).



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mitted to Vienna. Few data were published at the time, in accord with the secrecy with which the Austrian Empire surrounded all statistical data.<sup>6</sup> In the Stato Pontificio no systematic collection of vital statistics was undertaken, except in the city of Roma.<sup>7</sup> A census for the entire state was taken in 1853.<sup>8</sup> Finally, in the Regno delle due Sicilie, statistical tables drawn from parish registers, concerning the size and distribution of the population and vital statistics, were collected and occasionally published in an aggregate form. The reliability of these statistics, given the successive manipulations of the parish data, is seriously questioned. More care was exercised in Sicilia, administratively autonomous from the rest of the kingdom, where a *Direzione Generale della Statistica*, created in 1832, collected and partly published the vital statistics of the island from the 1830s until unification.<sup>9</sup>

With the exception of the French period—a secular intermission in a clergy-dominated system of data collection—almost the whole body of statistical material is drawn from parish sources: records of baptisms, burials, and *status animarum*, the annual count of the parish population made by the priest at Easter. The quality of this vast statistical material, for the most part still buried in the archives, is unequal, and continuous critical caution is required in its analysis, partly because of the varying degree of care employed by the priests in the registration of vital events (which depended on the control exercised by the higher authorities and, also, on the cultural level of the clergy) and partly because of the varying criteria employed by the central authorities in the collection and aggregation of the parish data. Mistakes were frequent in the aggregation of the statistics, often because of the omission of particular sectors of the population (religious minorities, institutional populations, and foreigners). The time reference of the data is also sometimes uncertain.

But it must be remembered that a thick network of parishes covered

<sup>6</sup> M. Romani, "Il movimento demografico in Lombardia dal 1750 al 1850," *Economia e Storia* II, no. IV (1955): 413.

<sup>7</sup> F. Bonelli, *Evoluzione demografica ed ambiente economico nelle Marche e nell'Umbria nell'Ottocento*, Torino, 1967, pp. 1ff. P. Castiglioni, *Della popolazione di Roma dalle origini ai nostri tempi*, Roma, 1878, pp. 158ff.

<sup>8</sup> Ministero del Commercio e dei Lavori Pubblici, *Statistica numerativa della popolazione dello Stato Pontificio, dell'anno 1853*, Roma, 1857. A. Bellettini, "Contenuto e tecnica degli ultimi Censimenti dello Stato Pontificio," mimeograph, Gruppo di Demografia Storica, Bologna, 1972.

<sup>9</sup> Giusti, *Pagine*, pp. 5-18. Maggiore-Perni, *La popolazione di Sicilia e di Palermo nel secolo XIX*, Palermo, 1897.

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the country, that the control of the clergy on the population was strict, and that very few vital events could pass unnoticed and unregistered.<sup>10</sup> In no respect can the statistical material of many premodern European populations be considered parallel with that of the developing nations of our time; and once collected and handled with careful critical sense, this material can give a good picture of the demographic situation of the country during the first sixty years of the century.

### 1.3 *Population Growth during the First Part of the Nineteenth Century*

A comprehensive history of the Italian population during the first part of the nineteenth century has still to be written. Although many monographs have been published—some of them very good—for the various states, a systematic study is lacking. Among the existing works, the most comprehensive is the rich monograph written by Castiglioni<sup>11</sup> as a historic introduction to the publication, in 1862, of the results of the censuses taken in 1857–1858 in several states of the North. In his work, the pre-unification statistical material—censuses and counts of the population of all kinds—is carefully collected, analyzed, and compared, of course, with the many limitations imposed by the rough techniques of analysis of the time. But Castiglioni purposely excluded from his analysis the vast and complex sector of vital statistics, and therefore this work is only indirectly useful for our purposes. It is, however, interesting to have a general idea of the growth of the population during the pre-unification period. Travaglini has critically analyzed, and partly corrected and integrated, Castiglioni's estimates; his series on the growth of the Italian population within the 1914 boundaries is given in Table 1.1. The rate of increase is, during the period considered, around .6 percent, almost identical to the rate of growth in the hundred years following unification, and not much higher than that experienced during the same period by Portugal (.4 percent) and Spain (.5 percent). Recurrent crises of mortality marked the history of the Italian population during the period under consideration—particularly the epidemic of typhus in 1817, and of cholera in the 1830s and again in the 1850s. The wars

<sup>10</sup> C. A. Corsini, "Libri dei matrimoni e della nascite," in Comitato Italiano, *Le fonti della demografia storica*.

<sup>11</sup> P. Castiglioni, *Introduzione storica dei Censimenti delle popolazioni italiane dai tempi antichi all'anno 1860*, Censimento degli antichi Stati Sardi (1.1.1858) e Censimento di Lombardia, di Parma e Modena, Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, Torino, 1862, Vol. I.