

A Brief History of Time

Exploring a database of “notable people” (3000BCE-2015AD) Version 1.0.1

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Abstract:

This paper describes a database of 1,243,776 notable people and 7,184,575 locations (Geolinks) associated with them throughout human history (3000BCE-2015AD). We first describe in details the various approaches and procedures adopted to extract the relevant information from their Wikipedia biographies and then analyze the database. Ten main facts emerge.

1. There has been an exponential growth over time of the database, with more than 60% of notable people still living in 2015, with the exception of a relative decline of the cohort born in the XVIIth century and a local minimum between 1645 and 1655.

2. The average lifespan has increased by 20 years, from 60 to 80 years, between the cohort born in 1400AD and the one born in 1900AD.

3. The share of women in the database follows a U-shape pattern, with a minimum in the XVIIth century and a maximum at 25% for the most recent cohorts.

4. The fraction of notable people in governance occupations has decreased while the fraction in occupations such as arts, literature/media and sports has increased over the centuries; sports caught up to arts and literature for cohorts born in 1870 but remained at the same level until the 1950s cohorts; and eventually sports came to dominate the database after 1950.

5. The top 10 visible people born before 1890 are all non-American and have 10 different nationalities. Six out of the top 10 born after 1890 are instead U.S. born citizens. Since 1800, the share of people from Europe and the U.S. in the database declines, the number of people from Asia and the Southern Hemisphere grows to reach 20% of the database in 2000.

6. The average distance between places of birth and death follows a U-shape pattern: the median distance was 316km before 500AD, 100km between 500 and 1500AD, and has risen continuously since then. The greatest mobility occurs between the age of 15 and 25.

7. Individuals with the highest levels of visibility tend to be more distant from their birth place, with a median distance of 785km for the top percentile as compared to 389km for the top decile and 176km overall.

8. In all occupations, there has been a rise in international mobility since 1960. The fraction of locations in a country different from the place of birth went from 15% in 1955 to 35% after 2000.

9. There is no positive association between the size of cities and the visibility of people measured at the end of their life. If anything, the correlation is negative.

10. Last and not least, we find a positive correlation between the contemporaneous number of entrepreneurs and the urban growth of the city in which they are located the following decades; more strikingly, the same is also true with the contemporaneous number or share of artists, positively affecting next decades city growth; instead, we find a zero or negative correlation between the contemporaneous share of “militaries, politicians and religious people” and urban growth in the following decades.