

**A World of Populations:
Twentieth-Century Demographic
Discourses and Practices in Global
Perspective**

Veranstalter: Corinna Unger (GHI Washington), Heinrich Hartmann (FU Berlin)

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The conveners inaugurated this workshop with the observation that the history of demography has been revitalized by recent scholarship, especially Matthew Connelly's exciting book *Fatal Misconception* (2008). Scholars on both sides of the Atlantic are increasingly engaged with the historical roles of demographers and the legacies of colonialism. Although the politicization of population is well documented, the aim of this workshop was not to demonize the experts or unmask a hegemonic conspiracy. Rather, the task at hand was to confront the messy realities of population policies and programs in action „from international conference rooms to remote villages.“

The first panel, „Discourses and Perspectives,“ began with THOMAS SCHULTE-UMBERG's paper on the case of Hermann Muckermann (1877-1962), a Catholic priest, scientist, and influential proponent of eugenics in Germany. Schulte-Umberg discussed Muckermann's curious relationship to hereditary biology, eugenic sterilization, and German Catholicism after the papal encyclical „*Casti connubii*,“ and presented Muckermann as an example of Catholics' attempts to come to terms with modernity. IAN INNERHOFER discussed the concept of „agricultural overpopulation“ in Southeastern Europe in the 1930s. Innerhofer argued that, in the context of the quasi-colonial German-led modernization of Balkan agriculture, demographic experts made themselves indispensable by reducing all issues to population. „Agricultural overpopulation“ thereby „misnamed“ a variety of grievances and inequities. ERIC LIMBACH discussed public policy debates in 1950s West Germany on the migration of refugees from the „underpopulated“ East to the „overcrowded“ West. He focused on the

influential roles of Eugene Kulischer (1891-1956) and Gunther Beijer (1904-1983) on post-war migration studies. JOSEF EHMER provided helpful comments on the „peculiarities“ of German historiography on demography, wherein a sophisticated discourse about demography grew out of an interest in the politics of population under National Socialism. Newer research is increasingly international in scope, as the panel reflected. Ehmer suggested that an explicitly biographical approach might be usefully applied to individual experts. The discussion turned to the applicability of Ludwik Fleck's concepts of a *Denkkollektiv* (thought collective) to the international network of demographers and the transfer of their ideas across national borders. The complementary approaches to individuals and their social networks remained a leit-motif throughout the workshop.

The panel continued with SANDRINE BERTAUX's paper on Alfred Sauvy (1898-1990) and the unexpected origins of the „Third World“ concept. Sauvy coined the iconic term in 1952, but it rapidly escaped his control. Bertaux argued that in contrast to its Cold War reception, the origins of the concept of the „Third World“ were closely linked to French fascism. Population, poverty, and the fraught relationship between Algeria and the rest of France were all bound up in Sauvy's conception of the „Third World.“ PATRICIA DEUSER discussed the colonial roots of the concept of „Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights“ (SRHR) in German development programs. She explored the genealogy of ideas about women's health from liberal colonial reforms in the wake of the Herero massacres to crypto-Malthusianism after the Cairo consensus (1994) and Peruvian sterilization programs (1999). Using Michel Foucault's concept of „biopolitics,“ Deuser argued that the liberal reform agenda tied human rights to the logic of economic optimization. PETER XENOS's paper on the *longue durée* of demographic change in Southeast Asia provided a critical view from within historical demography and area studies. Xenos described the changing realities and representations of Southeast Asian social structure from the myth of emptiness to feedback mechanisms. He argued that, aside from a short, sharp

fertility transition, migration was the key regulatory force driving population dynamics in Southeast Asia. Commenting on this panel, MARC FREY identified the unifying theme of long-term continuity. The ensuing discussion dealt with some of the methodological issues raised by the alleged continuities of such overarching concepts as colonialism, fascism, and even the very idea of „Southeast Asia.“

The second panel, „Methods and Institutions,“ covered the fraught category of race in the context of census-taking in Peru and Sweden. Focusing on the Peruvian demographer and politician Alberto Arca Parró (1901-1976), RAUL NECOCHEA described how „demographic optimism“ was built into Peru’s national census of 1940. Necochea applied Benedict Anderson’s concept of the „imagined community“ to the political project of forging a sense of national unity out of the technical category of mestizo. To this day, Peruvian politicians bank on their „racial impurity“ as a matter of „self-presentation.“ PER AXELSSON discussed the curiously „abandoned construction“ of ethnic categories in Swedish population statistics. He described the strange case of the „Sami category,“ which dates back to the Tabellverket (national population statistics) of the early nineteenth century but was dropped after the Second World War in the name of „equality.“ The upshot is that systematic information about Sami health and welfare is no longer being generated, a situation the UN has recently criticized. Based on his own research on the U.S. census, PAUL SCHOR’s comments focused on the interplay between statistical categories for „minorities“ and state building. The discussion turned to the „Big Question of Race,“ social constructivism versus positivism vis-à-vis counting people, and the slippery term „indigenous.“

The workshop reconvened the next day to continue with the second half of the panel, beginning with OSCAR UBHENIN’s paper on „demographic experiments“ in post-independence Nigeria. Enumerating and categorizing Nigerians has been a politically contentious task ever since the first national census of 1963. Although race and ethnicity were dropped from the most recent national census, counting people in Nigeria re-

mains as politicized as ever, as evinced by the fact that Lagos conducted its own parallel census in 2006. PATRICK SHARMA discussed the lifecycle of population control at Robert McNamara’s World Bank. Sharma was struck by the failure of a population program to take root at the bank, despite McNamara’s evident demographic zeal. Although McNamara wielded considerable political clout, he was effectively resisted by the bank. Sharma’s study highlighted the need for more institutional histories. HEINRICH HARTMANN’s comments were informed by his own research on demography’s prominence in the modern welfare-state apparatus. He observed that most of the conference papers where not explicitly postcolonial and reiterated the importance of dealing with demographic expertise at both the individual and institutional level.

The third panel, „Demography in Practice,“ began with ANNIKA BERG’s paper on a Swedish family-planning project in Travancore-Cochin in the 1950s, focusing on the work of a prominent husband-and-wife team, Axel and Signe Höjer. She traced Swedish state interference in the intimate lives of individuals at home and abroad through technologies of birth control from the rhythm method to mass sterilization. She warned, however, of diagnosing continuities too readily: „The history behind the sterilization campaigns is complex“ and cannot be reduced to „the West“ imposing technology on „the rest.“ THOMAS ROBERTSON discussed population programs in Nepal in the 1960s and 1970s. His project, which involves interview-based fieldwork, situates population programs at the village level in the broader environmental history of Nepal. Robertson, who wants to get at population practices on the ground, has so far come away with the preliminary impression that population control was a „mixed bag“; programs brought in services, but they also led to coercion and unintended consequences. EVA-MARIA SILIES presented her paper on the birth-control pill and „overpopulation“ in 1960s West Germany. She described how organizations such as „Pro Familia“ appropriated the birth control pill (Antibabypille) differently in Western Europe and in the „Third World.“ In West Germany, medical experts de-

bated the contested social function of the pill at home and its utility for population control overseas.

ERIC ROSS and CORINNA UNGER jointly commented on this panel. Ross formulated a broad critique of the workshop based on what he diagnosed as a theoretical gap in the population literature that, in his opinion, has widened since the appearance of Mahmood Mamdani's classic case study, *The Myth of Population Control* (1972). In particular, Ross expressed concern that in-depth studies focusing on „technical“ aspects like the transfer of knowledge and individual actors obscure the „big picture.“ He argued that India should be situated in the context of the perennial resurgence of Malthusianism whenever capitalism is in crisis, and that population policies in India were, along with the Green Revolution, primarily aimed at „liquidating the peasantry.“ Corinna Unger offered a contrasting evaluation informed by different schools of historiography. Reexamining the „big picture,“ Unger observed that the newly prominent global perspective could help us reevaluate the role of the Cold War and move beyond the conflict's rhetoric in studying population politics. As scholars have been paying more attention to activities in such „peripheral“ places as Sweden and Nepal, they have been finding out that experts, like their projects, are a „mixed bag,“ and that it is difficult to measure the intended and unintended consequences of their ideas and actions „in the field.“ In the lively debate that followed, Matthew Connelly observed that, when it comes to digging around in the so-called population archive, no single theory is sufficient.

The workshop closed with some final comments by Matthew Connelly, Susan Watkins, and Josef Ehmer. Connelly confessed that when he first started working on population, he found it to be rather „depressing.“ However, in light of recent scholarship, population is rapidly turning into an „exciting“ field with lots of potential. In his estimation, the *raison d'être* of the workshop was that „we think this history matters,“ and one of the participants' main objectives should be to go beyond population-planning success stories and recover the „less-than-usable past.“ In turn, Watkins observed that the stories about Ne-

pal and Nigeria are very similar to the experiences of other developing countries between the 1960s and 1980s. She suggested that scholars familiarize themselves with the „standard choreography“ of population planning and then try to find out what is distinctive about individual cases. Watkins was struck by the „hubris“ of the idea that sex in the „Third World“ could be planned „from a tall building in the center of New York.“ She emphatically agreed with Connelly that there is „enormous potential“ for scholars to historicize key individuals, institutions, and social networks. Watkins left the participants with the message that there are striking parallels between the choreographies of the population and the AIDS movement, which will soon be history. Last but not least, Ehmer's assessment of the workshop was that it had taken a big step towards painting a more differentiated picture of population. He identified a master narrative with a discriminatory agenda, on the one hand, and discriminating practices and technologies, on the other. These two different layers involve different sets of actors, spaces, elites, and targets. In terms of moving beyond the elites, Ehmer suggested that scholars pay more attention to the schoolteachers and journalists who popularized population in textbooks and newspapers. Returning to the peculiarities of German historiography, he pointed out that recent studies on National Socialist population pedagogy are a good place to start. Finally, Ehmer called attention to the analytical potential of „business cycles“ in the population discourse. Did demographers lead or follow the ebb and flow of population in the public sphere? Ehmer surely spoke for all participants when he highlighted the value of having people from diverse parts of the world participate in this workshop. It was truly a global workshop in more than one way.

Program:

Panel I: Discourses and Perspectives

Chair: Corinna Unger

Thomas Schulte-Umberg (University of Münster): Catholic Population Discourse and Policy: The Case of Heinrich Muckermann

Ian Innerhofer (University of Vienna): The Discussion About „Agricultural Overpopula-

tion" in South-Eastern Europe, 1930-45

Eric Limbach (Michigan State University): Overcrowded West, Underpopulated East: Refugee Migration and Demographic Discourse in 1950s West Germany

Josef Ehmer (University of Vienna): Comment

Panel I (cont'd): Discourses and Perspectives
Chair: Richard F. Wetzell (GHI)

Sandrine Bertaux (Marmara University Istanbul): Recasting „Third World“ in the First World: Alfred Sauvy, Fascist Legacies, Colonial Domination and the Rise of American Social Demography

Patricia Deuser (University of Leipzig): The Concept of „Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights“ (SRHR) in German Development Programs and the Colonial Roots of Women Oriented Development Policies

Peter Xenos (University of Hawaii): The Long Term in Southeast Asian Demography and Population Policy

Marc Frey (Jacobs University Bremen): Comment

Panel II: Methods and Institutions
Chair: Uta Balbier (GHI)

Raul Necochea (McGill University): Optimism in the Peruvian Census of 1940

Per Axelsson (University Umeå, Sweden): Abandoned Constructions? Statistical Enumeration of Indigenous Swedish Sami

Paul Schor (University of Paris): Comment

Panel II (cont'd): Demographic Methods and Institutions
Chair: Marc Frey

Oscar Edoror Ubhenin (Ambrose Alli University, Nigeria): Demographic Norms and Population Dynamics in Nigeria

Patrick Sharma (UCLA): The Birth, Life, and Death of Population Control at the World Bank

Heinrich Hartmann: Comment

Panel III: Demography in Practice
Chair: Corinna Unger (GHI)

Annika Berg (Uppsala University): Planning

Families in Travancore-Cochin: An Early 1950s „Swedish“ Pilot Project in Relation to Interwar Domestic Population Policy and Later Bilateral Population Aid

Thomas Robertson (Worcester Polytechnic Institute): Population Programs in Nepal in the 1960s and 1970s

Eva-Maria Silies (University of Hamburg): Contraception Against 'Overpopulation'. West German Perspectives on Birth Control at Home and Abroad in the 1960s

Panel III cont'd: Demography in Practice

Chair: Heinrich Hartmann

Eric Ross (University Den Haag/Georgetown University): Comment

Corinna Unger: Comment

Panel VI: Comments and Final Discussion

Chair: Heinrich Hartmann and Corinna Unger

Matthew Connelly (Columbia University)

Josef Ehmer (University of Vienna)

Susan Watkins (University of Pennsylvania)

Tagungsbericht *A World of Populations: Twentieth-Century Demographic Discourses and Practices in Global Perspective*. 29.05.2009–30.05.2009, Washington, D.C., in: H-Soz-Kult 30.09.2009.