

HT 2010: Creating a World Population: The Global Transfer of Techniques of Population Control in the 20th Century

Veranstalter: Veronika Lipphardt, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science Berlin; Corinna R. Unger, Jacobs University Bremen; Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands (VHD); Verband der Geschichtslehrer Deutschlands (VGD)

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The issue of „population“ occupies historians for multiple reasons. One of them is the fact that „population“ as a social and academic construct is genuinely transnational in nature; the same is true of demography as a discipline. The transnational dimension of „population“ enables historians to do research *beyond borders*, as the slogan of this year's Historikertag in Berlin stated. Consequently, the panel on the global transfer of techniques of population control in the 20th century, which is summarized in the following, neatly fit the meeting's theme, both thematically and with regard to the interest in the methodological challenges of border-crossing.

The panel's goal, as the chairs CORINNA R. UNGER (Bremen) and VERONIKA LIPPHARDT (Berlin) pointed out, was not primarily to present answers but to raise and discuss conceptual questions in order to encourage a continuous scholarly dialogue across disciplinary divides. In their introduction, Unger and Lipphardt outlined recent debates in the field to frame the contributions of the panel. Ever since the use of the term „population“ became popular, it has had a double meaning dependent on the aims and interests of politicians, experts or journalists. In their interpretations of demographic statistics, „population“ often figured as a threat to security or resources, and many differentiated between quantity and quality.¹ Lately, Unger and Lipphardt underlined, historians have focused on contemporary debates about quantity; consequently we know more about perceptions of „overpopulation“ than on cases of dramatic demographic decline. Also, historians have preferred the top-down approach

and often neglected the „voices from below“. Therefore, Unger and Lipphardt wanted the panel to aim at analyzing both sides of the issue. The thread tying the section together was the focus on intermediaries, meaning persons, objects, and images functioning as tools of knowledge transfer to implement the global population discourse in local circumstances.

ALEXANDRA WIDMER (Berlin), an anthropologist by training, opened up the panel. Her presentation, which focused on the region of the New Hebrides, a popular missionary destination from the mid-1800s on, combined the social history of a place with an analysis of population control measures. According to anthropologists, missionaries and public health doctors, the New Hebrides had a depopulation problem, which they tried to solve through the transfer of knowledge. In the 1940s, local men were sent to Fiji to be trained as assistant doctors. Additionally, expatriate nuns set up and ran two nurse training schools for indigenous women in the 1950s. Through her analysis of persons as intermediaries, Widmer focused on the contact zone between nuns, nurses, and child-bearing women. Working with oral history methods, she illustrated how external technologies meant to improve maternal and child health care services were inscribed into local rituals and practices. She showed how research on the micro level, which captures the „voices from below“, can help to address the problem of a static „western“ perspective.

In her paper, Widmer examined the period between the 1950s and the 1970s, at time when the issue of depopulation became transformed into concerns about overpopulation. Therefore, she mentioned that IUD and the pill complemented the technological tools introduced during the maternal and child health care campaign. However, she did not discuss the categories experts used to diagnose the shift from depopulation to overpopulation. The question then arises whether that shift was inspired by a global discourse emphasizing overpopulation, and how that discourse reached the New Hebrides. Generally, apart from mentioning the World Popu-

¹Thomas Etzemüller described this framework as the „matrix“ of population discourse, see: Idem, *Ein ewigwährender Untergang*, Bielefeld 2007, p. 47.

lation Conference of 1927, the global dimension and its effects on local practices played only a secondary role in the presentation. Although methodologically challenging, linking the rich local material with the global discourse would be most fruitful, it seems.

JESSE OLSZYNSKO-GRYN (Cambridge) showed how the global theoretical discourse of overpopulation interfered with practices developed in the field of medical research. Recounting the evolution of techniques of female sterilization, he explained how those techniques enabled experts not only to think but also to act in a global manner. With a material history approach, Olszynko-Gryn described the initial development of laparoscopic sterilization in the 1960s and the USAID-supported distribution of that technique in developing countries in the 1970s. In the last part of his paper, he presented some examples of the manifestation of this technology in India in the 1980s. He underlined the efforts of USAID to transform earlier sterilization approaches into an efficient, affordable tool that could be easily implemented in developing countries. The intermediary in this case was an object, the laparator, a sterilization instrument. Turning away from the abstract, theoretical discourse about overpopulation, Olszynko-Gryn illustrated the impact of this object, which made mass sterilization campaigns in India possible. There was one physician in India who completed up to 156 sterilizations within two hours, which meant that he spent less than one minute with each woman. Thanks to Olszynko-Gryn's detailed (if somewhat descriptive) presentation, the audience gained a better understanding of the relevance of technology in promoting specific approaches to „population control“.

The last paper was presented by SYBILLA NIKOLOW (Bielefeld) and dealt with images as intermediaries. Those images translated knowledge generated by social scientists into statistical visual displays and thereby became tools of quantitative argument, which could be understood by lay people. To illustrate her thesis that the modern concept of world population was constituted by quantitative and statistical representations, Nikolow focused on Otto Neurath's visual method of pictorial statistics. Since the Austrian social sci-

entist (1882-1945) aimed at visualizing population not as an entity but as part of a social order through techniques of differentiation, Neurath differed from the mainstream of his time, Nikolow argued. To underline her point, Nikolow talked about some of the characteristics of Neurath's method (Isotype), like the rule that every sign should represent a definite quantity, the effort to produce „speaking signs“ in symbolizing birth by babies and death by gravestones, and the distinction of different groups by skin color. Furthermore, she reported that Neurath used „indexes of modernity“, such as lifespan, suicide rank, educational level and distribution of consumer goods. While the audience gained a detailed overview about Neurath's techniques and intentions, Nikolow stopped short of analyzing his concepts of modernity and social order and did not reflect upon the conditions of understanding his visual statistics in Neurath's time. Her goal, as she stated, was to discuss the limits and the potential of visual statistics by way of Neurath's method, however, she didn't contextualize or historicize Neurath's approach.

PATRICK WAGNER (Universität Halle) commented on all three papers and closed with a general remark on the topic. With regard to Nikolow's paper, Wagner pleaded for a differentiation between the social scientist's intentions and the structural conditions of visibility. In order to extract these conditions, one has to define the rules of visualization in a given situation. Hence, it has to be taken into account that the legibility of visual statistics depends on the degree to which they link to categories and stereotypes already established in society. Consequently, Wagner raised the question how complex social phenomena that can be represented in visual statistics can be analytically separated from those that don't allow for visual representation. Wagner wondered what kind of repercussions the limits of visibility might have on the evolution of expert knowledge. Finally, he posed the methodological question how researchers could measure the impact of visual technologies on a mass audience.

Discussing Jesse Olszynko-Gryn's paper, Wagner diagnosed that in the 1960s „over-

population“ changed from a political issue to a social disease that could be „treated“ by medical interventions. He raised the question of power of physicians over the freedom of choice of families. Wagner pleaded to integrate the political framework more strongly, and he suggested that Olszynko-Gryn’s top-down approach could be complemented by discussing examples of agency and the process of „appropriation“ on part of those individuals who were sterilized.² Wagner referred to the bottom-up perspective in Widmer’s paper, in which she considered the process of writing external interventions into established rituals, gender relations, and structures of knowledge and power. Here again, the commentator invited the audience to look at the other direction of the assumed appropriation process: „Are there any hints that practices and rituals performed in the New Hebrides had an impact on the biomedical birth control technologies brought to the islands by doctors and nuns?“

Wagner encouraged the audience to discuss the transfer of knowledge as transfer of power. In conclusion, he raised the question how expert knowledge changed due to the efforts of transforming theoretical expertise into practical approaches and techniques. How could it be possible, he wondered, to gather and integrate the internal feedback (in the so-called developing countries) into the external approaches, and how to understand if and in which ways this feedback had an impact on the local practices.

Thanks to the inspiring presentations, a lively discussion followed, raising questions of methodology as well as content. It was pointed out that the papers had a very strong focus on transnational history, and it was questioned how the impact of the international forums involved could be integrated. Moreover, possibilities to consider the gender dimension, particularly in Widmer’s paper, were discussed. Some raised the question of the role of the state in population projects.

When it comes to methodological questions, writing the story of the creation of a world population is still a work in progress. But the panel showed that the focus on intermediaries offers a promising approach to connect global and local level, scientific dis-

course and the knowledge of lay people, and the ambitions of scientific research in countries like the United States with their impact on individuals in countries like India. As such, the panelists contributed in a productive and fruitful way to current discussions within the discipline.

Overview:

Veronika Lipphardt (Berlin) / Corinna R. Unger (Bremen): Introduction: The Global Transfer of Techniques of Population Control in the 20th Century

Jesse Olszynko-Gryn (Cambridge): The Globalization of Laparoscopic Sterilization.

Alexandra Widmer (Berlin): An Anglican Nun, New Hebridean Nurses and Indigenous Women: Assemblages in the Attempts to Increase the Population in the New Hebrides.

Sybilla Nikolow (Bielefeld): Visualizing Population Changes: Pictorial Statistics and Global Demography

Patrick Wagner (Halle): Comment

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²This remark is based on Emma Tarlos’s methodological approach in: *Unsettling Memories. Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi*, London 2000.