

INTRODUCTION

COUNTING, CONSTRUCTING, AND  
CONTROLLING POPULATIONS

The History of Demography, Population Studies, and Family  
Planning in the Twentieth Century

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“Population,” a topic long considered the exclusive concern of demographers and welfare politicians, has come to the attention of historians in recent years. The reasons for this new interest seem to be anchored in public discussions and societal concerns about contemporary and future demographic developments. For one, many European nations are experiencing a decrease in birth rates at a time when the influx of migrants from African and Asian countries is triggering debates about increasing religious and ethnic heterogeneity, and the social and cultural effects this has on the formerly more homogenous societies. The expectation that climate change will bring about mass migration movements in the near future adds to the perception of crisis in terms of wealth and security in many Western nations.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is not only the demographic consequences of these enduring changes that play a certain role in the formation of these perceptions, it is also the population as a dynamic actor in changing contexts. Some scholars, as well as some representatives of the mass media, associate high birth rates and the resulting young populations with the political and social tensions in many Arab countries, and identify them as one reason for political unrest or the rise of terrorism.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, demographic changes taking place in many regions of the world are inspiring new political debates. This has led a growing number of historians to turn to older debates about “overpopulation.”<sup>3</sup> Many of those historians share a discomfort with the neglect of historical thinking in today’s political use of

demographic concepts. They consider it important to take into account the historical context of demographic arguments, and to be aware of the historicity of debates on population issues in general. Consequently, historians are interested in earlier discussions about demographic developments and their economic, political, and social consequences, particularly with regard to the potential effects those phenomena might have on the conceptualization of the nation state in an increasingly interconnected world, in which trans-border movements have steadily gained in frequency. The importance of the nation state in producing knowledge about demographic developments and in defining categories to describe its “population” figures prominently in many studies,<sup>4</sup> as do historical debates about migration restrictions and population transfers.<sup>5</sup> The growing interest in historical precedents for today’s developments and debates is linked to the second reason why many historians have become interested in historicizing demographic discourse: the continuing fascination with transnational history, particularly with transfers and transformations across national borders, and the evolution of a sphere of international interaction parallel to the established political arena.<sup>6</sup> This becomes manifest in the attention historians pay to the role of demographic knowledge in the colonial context<sup>7</sup> as well as in development programs, and in the emphasis on birth control and family planning throughout the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> This volume aims to add to debates on the genuinely transnational character of demographic discourse while also challenging some of the assumptions on which they are based. It intends to do so by scrutinizing the process of the production and transfer of demographic knowledge and population policies across the globe.<sup>9</sup>

In our understanding, the history of demography as an academic discipline was (and is) characterized by its close proximity to politics.<sup>10</sup> We assume that demographic knowledge was never purely technical and above all not “apolitical,” even if many agents tried to argue that “natural” demographic patterns invariably called for specific population policies. Hence, the authors of this volume propose to probe deeper into the political processes of knowledge production and to analyze how this knowledge was mobilized to define and enact new forms of population policies. We would also like to highlight how different kinds of localities are linked in these concepts. The topic of “transnational demographics” in no way aims to replace a local level of analysis, but rather tries to point to the interconnections between the local, the national and the claims for a global dimension of demographic issues.

To do so, we follow three overarching questions: i) Is demography as a discipline different from other scientific disciplines because of its multidisciplinary, or perhaps transdisciplinary, character, and if so, how? ii) How are “populations” constructed, and how do research settings and the institutions involved contribute to produce a common understanding of what “population” is? iii) How does demographic knowledge become transformed into a scientific approach applied

in practice, and how does the knowledge change when it comes into contact with local practices of speaking about populations and regulating them? Using these three questions as guidelines, the authors hope to offer new perspectives on the social and transnational history of the twentieth century. Demographic knowledge helped to shape representations of the social, and it emerged from a socially embedded background that transgressed borders, not only on the level of explicit international politics and organizations, but also through transnational communities of experts. Hence, we suggest employing a history of knowledge perspective on the history of demography, population studies, and population politics as well as a social historian's perspective on the agents involved.<sup>11</sup>

This perspective, as well as the co-evolution of demographic thinking and practices of the welfare state, points to a chronology that will be inherent in this volume. Many chapters explicitly or implicitly focus on the 1960s and 1970s, a time when discourses about "world population" gained importance and demographic reasoning contributed to the reorientation of social policies in different countries. Time periods like these, reflecting a particular intensification of debates, allow historians of knowledge and science to gain insight into the reasons why some approaches were more "successful" than others. However, this chronology is based on our particular methodological approach, and therefore by no means exclusive. It allows us to see demography in different time frames and to acknowledge the role of preceding developments while also taking into account more recent dynamics in the academic thinking about demography.

In the following, we will outline some of the historical and sociological perspectives that frame our interest.

### **Historical and Sociological Perspectives on Demographic Knowledge**

For two centuries, Thomas Malthus has influenced public discourse about demographic developments like few other scholars. His sinister prediction that the globe would become overpopulated has produced anxiety in societies all over the globe, taken up time and again in public discourse.<sup>12</sup> The experience of counting and being counted was a necessary precondition for this seemingly uniform apocalyptic population discourse. It is in this sense, we would argue, that the history of statistical knowledge overlaps directly with the transnational history of demographic discourses. Malthus's normative way of thinking about population sizes preceded the development of a clearly defined census method, which was established at the Statistical Congress in St. Petersburg in 1872.<sup>13</sup> In the following years, most European states began to regularly count their populations, thereby producing reliable pools of demographic knowledge. The emergence of "population" as a political issue in the second half of the nineteenth century was

intimately linked to changing conditions of policy-making in the modern era. Statistics and demographic knowledge were among the key necessities of the emerging European welfare states, linked both to bureaucrats and to new administrative institutions like private assurance companies.<sup>14</sup> The administrative interest in demography influenced the discipline's institutional and methodological evolution, and it accelerated technological developments in the administration of "large numbers."<sup>15</sup>

The practice of counting individuals, which can be understood as an instrument of modern governance in a Foucauldian sense, preceded its systematic application as a measure of statecraft. Governments were not the only ones interested in demographic statistics; however, in an age of nationalism, many industrialized societies used population sizes to define themselves, often by claiming a quantitative superiority over their neighbors. As a result of the American and European nation states' self-definition as statistical and demographic entities, professional, social, and ethnic categories that were used to describe a nation's inhabitants became entangled with each other and produced a new, highly politicized understanding of "population."<sup>16</sup> In recent years, many historians, social scientists, and sociologists of knowledge have embraced this constructivist perspective on demographic discourses and practices as expressions of increasingly complex regulatory requirements under the conditions of "reflexive modernity" (U. Beck).

Since the 1980s, the interplay between science and nationally anchored social phenomena has received much scholarly attention. Ian Hacking has argued that we should understand the political history of vital statistics in Europe in light of a paradigmatic shift in mathematics, the development of probability calculus.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, the statistically informed view on European populations shaped particular cultures of scientific evidence.<sup>18</sup> By installing new institutions relying on experts, a "knowledge society" came into being whose protagonists tried to foresee the future and simultaneously develop scientific methods to shape that future.<sup>19</sup> The notion of being able to plan society characterized much of the twentieth century and made social engineering a core element of policy making across political and ideological borders.<sup>20</sup> The concept of "population" played an important role in this regard. For example, communist and Keynesian regimes alike relied on empirical information about population size and constitution to formulate their economic plans.<sup>21</sup> The reliance on demographic data increased simultaneously with the growing possibilities of mathematical computing in the postwar era.<sup>22</sup>

This brings us to the modalities of demographic knowledge production. Over the last years, the role of the localities in which scientific evidence is generated has received growing attention.<sup>23</sup> Scholars in the history of science have focused on the laboratory to show the interrelatedness of expert networks, objects, and the social process of knowledge production. With the statistical "revolution"

of the nineteenth century in mind, one might be tempted to see an analogy between the rising number of statistical offices in almost all European countries and the growing number of scientific laboratories. If we accept that the notion of population emerged from the categories developed by networks of researchers, it might be worth returning to the specific settings of their production, even by transgressing the classical *topos* of the laboratory.<sup>24</sup> To take the hypothesis one step further, one could argue that the statistical offices were part of a “social and cultural materiality” that provided the basis for the multiplicity of localities of modern knowledge production.<sup>25</sup> It seems promising to study the process of how “population” as scientific evidence started to travel from its place of production to the outside world.

The focus on the local circumstances of knowledge production has encouraged attempts to overcome the traditional dichotomy between scientific subjects and objects. The interaction between academic research and the public in censuses seem to induce what modern sociologists of knowledge refer to as looping effects.<sup>26</sup> Subjects being counted often understand much more about the methodology of the surveys and their underlying assumptions than statisticians suspect. Consequently they may adjust their attitudes to the categories of statistical thinking. They will respond to surveys and data-taking in accordance with their understanding of what is being searched for. This does not necessarily imply that their responses are driven by personal interest; individuals might also adopt the statistical descriptors to make sense of their own personal situation and behavior. The interplay between demographic subjects and statistical categories offers links to related discussions in the history and sociology of knowledge as well as to the construction of subjects and objects in other scientific fields.<sup>27</sup>

Historical research on demography has also debated the question of a particular European understanding of social engineering by numbers.<sup>28</sup> In spite of well-established international ties, the effort to “nationalize” demographic discourses and to interpret demographic data through the “national lens” characterized demography in much of the twentieth century. This development seems to have been related to a reinforced eugenic research agenda, which defined qualitative criteria for “desirable” national populations. Nonetheless, the eugenic movement from its inception was heavily influenced by an international community of biologists and demographers who promoted eugenics as part of the internationalization of scientific expertise.<sup>29</sup>

To understand the interrelatedness of national and transnational academic discourses and practices one needs to take a closer look at the field of demography in the colonial and postcolonial context. The emergence of the statistical and anthropological sciences that shaped early demographic discourses coincided with the climax of European colonial expansion overseas, and colonial experiences clearly influenced demographic practices and argumentative patterns in the

European metropolises.<sup>30</sup> Thus it is evident that decolonization played a major role in reshaping postwar demographic thinking.

Scholarly interest in the “globalization” of demographic expertise and population discourses in the postwar era has blossomed recently. The focus of much of the research lies in the history of demographic thinking in the context of development concepts. The complex histories of demographic transition theory cannot be summarized as a simple function of modernization theories.<sup>31</sup> Already in the prewar era demographic thinking provided an important antithesis to contemporary notions of modernization, and many scholars considered the nexus between modernity and demographic transition reversible. We have learned much about the role of the new nations’ regimes in promoting and sometimes enforcing birth control, but comparatively little about the effects that the globalization of the political perspective had on demographic knowledge and methods. Many of the contributions in this volume aim to equilibrate these perspectives by relating “Third World” family planning programs and their often coercive character to new ways and models of analyzing data. For example, one could perhaps argue that new approaches like cybernetics not only influenced representations of the population but also had a notable effect on development programs. To better understand the issues at stake, it will be helpful to study in greater detail the infrastructure of demographic knowledge production in the postwar era. Non-governmental organizations like the International Planned Parenthood Federation (founded in 1952), institutions like the Population Council (founded in 1952) and the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (founded in 1967), as well as large international demographic conferences (starting 1954 in Rome) provided forums for international demographic experts to meet and exchange ideas. Simultaneously, immense amounts of public and private money flowed into demographic research at dozens of universities and research centers, and equally considerable sums were invested into programs to develop more effective birth control methods.<sup>32</sup> One could argue that together those institutions and centers constituted a globalized demographic laboratory. Studying closely the transdisciplinary research performed in the “global lab” from a history of science perspective should allow us to observe how new demographic methods affected the public perception of “population” under the conditions of decolonization, the Cold War, and accelerated globalization.

### **Topics in the History of Demography and Population Studies**

Taking up these perspectives we can identify three broad fields that deserve systematic attention: the institutionalization and professionalization of demography as an academic discipline in the twentieth century; the application of demographic theories and approaches and the resulting construction of specific “populations”;

and the translation of demographic knowledge into population policies domestically and in the international arena. The way in which the individual contributions are organized in this volume is intended to provide a degree of orientation in a very broad field. However, we want to emphasize that the contributions address a variety of questions and cannot be reduced easily to one point. Hence, in the following we do not aim to impose a “grand narrative,” but to sketch overarching perspectives along the three lines of inquiry outlined above.

The first section addresses the process of the production of demographic subjects in different national and transnational contexts. Here we are particularly interested in the co-evolution of demographic discourses in scientific communities and among a wider public, and the interplay between discourses (which we define in a broad sense as acts of conscious or unconscious communication, not necessarily as a form of oral or written contribution to the advancement of demographics), nation building, and the establishment of institutions.

Paul Schor opens the section with an analysis of the American census in the second half of the nineteenth century, a time when the United States was experiencing both massive immigration and the effects of emancipation. Consequently, the census focused on questions referring to ethnic and racial difference, thereby reinforcing and sometimes challenging existing stereotypes. Enumerators’ reports to the census office reflect a high sensitivity for difference, both negatively and positively described, and an understanding of individuals as representatives of their respective social or racial groups rather than of the American nation. As Schor shows, censuses did not necessarily contribute to the process of nation building in the sense of increasing national unity; a census could also help to cement differences and create a statistical image of a highly pluralistic, unequal population.

The situation was different in Latin America in the postwar period, as Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney suggests in her chapter on family planning approaches in Chile and Peru in the 1960s. While both countries referred to global population paradigms, they did so in markedly different ways, and in response to distinct historical trajectories and political priorities. In Chile, doctors’ efforts to prevent abortion together with their interest in limiting population growth resulted in the establishment of large, state-supported family planning programs. Peru, on the other hand, where eugenic elements were present in demographic debates much longer than in other Latin American countries, focused on private, decentralized activities and installed official state-sponsored family planning programs only in the 1980s. Hence, national frameworks played a decisive role in shaping demographic thinking and practices.

In the case of interwar Poland, the felt need for national self-confidence and credibility had a notable impact on Polish experts’ activities in the field of demography. Morgane Labbé, in her chapter on Polish research on reproduction in the interwar period, emphasizes how closely individual biographies, personal

networks and scientific approaches were linked to each other, and how they influenced each other in producing a specific understanding of demographic problems. As her research shows, paying attention to individuals and networks also helps us to better understand how demographic discourses traversed national, political, and ideological borders. This is true, for example, of Polish demographer Stefan Szulc and his reception of the work of Kuczynski and Lotka in the 1920s and 1930s. And as Thomas Robertson demonstrates in his chapter on two key figures in the debate about “overpopulation,” Barry Commoner and Paul Ehrlich, the role of individuals can provide insight into why some demographic positions gained much greater public prominence than others.

Corinna R. Unger’s chapter studies the rise and fall of one of these approaches to demography: behavioralism. In the 1950s and 1960s, the belief in the existence of universal laws of human behavior seemed to outweigh notions of cultural or racial difference. Against this background it seemed possible to construct a “world population,” which was understood as the sum of individuals making reproductive choices. If those individual decisions could be steered in the “right” direction with the help of scientific interventions, the “population problem” identified as urgent in the 1960s could be solved, contemporaries believed.

The issue of transferring academic and institutional “models” abroad links the first to the second section, which is devoted to the question of how different kinds of demographic knowledge under various institutional, political, cultural, and geographic conditions produce demographic subjects. In his chapter on the history of demography in South Korea, for example, John P. DiMoia shows how intimately the establishment of South Korean demographic institutions was tied to the outcome of World War II, specifically the occupation by American troops. Yet he also demonstrates that it would be reductionist to consider the Republic of Korea’s (ROK) demographic institutions solely a copy of American institutions. South Korea’s ties to imperial and postwar Japan strongly influenced the ROK’s demographic structures, as did its relations with Taiwan. Hence, regional networks overlapped or competed with international agencies and produced new institutional patterns reflecting the specific historical circumstances under which they came into existence.

Similarly, transferring a demographic discourse from one part of the world to another is a process that cannot easily be reduced to a mere spatial transposition. The complexity of this process often led actors to change their basic assumptions. Ideas shifted away from the original intentions of their social carriers and, in a different setting, had other socioeconomic effects than in the environment in which they had been developed. This phenomenon of multilayered transformation challenges the notion of a homogenous demographic “discourse.” It also implies that the transfer of ideas about population was not limited to oral or written acts of communication but also took place as part of the exchange of material products and technologies.

Jesse Olszynko-Gryn, in his chapter on the history of surgical sterilization, suggests understanding the transfer of discourses as more than the pure transfer of ideas and proposes looking at the technological side of this transfer. Analyzing the introduction of the new sterilization method of laparoscopy, he describes a series of “trade-offs” this technology went through in order to create manageable and “efficient” devices for world population control. The technological bias that many family planning programs implicitly embraced undermined many of the explicit discourses about reproductive choices and women’s rights. “Population control” was thus strongly materially biased.

The situation in pre- and postcolonial Vanuatu seems to point in a similar direction. Alexandra Widmer describes how everyday behavior of the population and their reproductive habits became subjects of the expertise of local nurses who introduced a “filtered” form of global knowledge about reproduction into the local setting. Widmer argues that the notion of technology needs to be broadened to be able to understand the effects of the transfer of concepts on local situations. In this perspective, midwives bringing clean sheets to villages are part of the same category of actors as reproductive experts representing New York’s Population Council. Here the relational quality of knowledge bridges the classical caesura between colonial and postcolonial contexts, seeing that the carriers of local knowledge often remained the same.

Maria Dörnemann introduces readers to another issue related to the complex transfer of knowledge by studying the multifold processes of translation that led to the implementation of population programs in Kenya. For one, her chapter points to the fact that an abstract idea of economic development went hand in hand with the idea of regulating individual reproductive behavior. Yet the “development lens” was not a one-way street, and should be looked at from two sides, with Kenya being not only a respondent but a proactive producer of knowledge which Western experts and institutions took into account. The chapter also analyzes the learning processes of Kenyan officials and finds that they cannot be reduced to the taking up of demographic paradigms or abstract statistical skills. They also included appropriating statistical metaphors and strategic behavior that served to promote Kenyan institutional, academic, and political interests.

Heinrich Hartmann’s analysis of population programs in Turkey supports these findings by relativizing the role of population experts and their self-declared scientocratic independence. Studying a national and an international method of conducting behavioralist programs in rural Anatolia in the 1960s and 1970s, Hartmann’s chapter helps us to understand the impact of political negotiations in the transfer processes. Applying the “right” means of investigating reproduction patterns was not as neutral an activity as many experts presented it. Hence, the experts’ room for maneuver was limited so long as the experts themselves aimed to implement particular programs, thereby making deliberate choices.

It is an explicit goal of this volume to open doors for a discussion of the history of demographic thinking across borders. It certainly does not claim to cover every aspect of this history or to provide a complete analysis of every macro region of the world. Instead, the volume is designed to give an overview of the major fields of interest that are linked to a transnational history of demographic discourses and practices. It might allow interested readers to find clues for further research topics or to define genuinely transnational materials and methods for a new approach to the history of demography. And, perhaps, it might convince others that the history of defining and thinking of the world's populations never was nor ever will be a purely national history.

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