

# **Engineering Global Population: The Reasoning and Policies of the Population Council**

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The Population Council, the first "global player" in the field of population, was founded in 1952 and is still, in the year of 2001, in operation. Within these nearly 50 years, its view of the problems of population, the strategies to address them, and its perception of the respective results have changed several times, in significant ways. In the following pages I trace these changes from the founding of the Population Council to the early 1970s. I am not aiming at a chronological history of the Population Council; rather, I will try to characterize what I perceive as distinct phases of its history, each differing in how "population problem" is perceived, in what is seen as possible for an organization like the Population Council in addressing the "problem," as well as in the strategies and policies current in the U.S. and abroad.

My story ends with the emergence of a totally new paradigm in the discussion of "population," a paradigm which gained the upper hand within the global discourse on "population" during the first half of the 1970s with the emergence of the "second" women's movement in the U.S. or, more generally within the "North Atlantic world," which succeeded in changing the way people talked publicly about human reproduction. Hitherto most experts, above all physicians, geneticists, sociologists, demographers, and members of the political elite, had claimed and asserted the legitimacy to decide what is

right and wrong on reproductive questions. The "second" women's movement, however, fought to establish legitimacy within this discussion for the new collective voice of women. They argued that reproduction affected women as women in a specific way that transcends class divisions and penetrates everything - work, political and public affairs, sexuality, creativity, dreams.<sup>1</sup> This "feminist" strain of reasoning in "first" and "second" world countries coalesced at least partially with post- and anti-colonial groups in the "third world" to try to change the debate and policies on "population policies" in "developing" countries as well as in the industrialized world. The changes caused by the emergence of this point of view ended one phase of the movement to control population and began another phase.

I am working on a comparative study of US-American and Austrian debates and policies in the field of reproduction from the 1920s to the 1970s. My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center was part of this study. I am right in the middle of collecting information and gathering sources, so I am not yet in a position to draw final conclusions. The following discussion relies mainly on archival material I examined during my visit to the RAC: the files of the Population Council, files of John D. Rockefeller 3rd's associates, mainly Jane Dunlop, but also David Lelewar, and some files from the John D. Rockefeller 3rd papers, especially "Office and Homes Files." I am hardly taking into account any additional archival sources or the rich academic work which has already been published.<sup>2</sup>

In respect to the development of the Population Council, my first hypothesis is that changes in the vice-presidency of the Council were always related to major modifications in the normative basis of the Population Council's policies and strategies, its main activities and their aims. Within the time span I will focus on there were four vice-presidents. After the founding initiative of John D. Rockefeller 3rd, who served as president of the Council until 1977, Frederick Osborn became the first vice-president of the Council. Though the Population Council was clearly a post-World War II-organization (its emergence being a symbol that the U. S. had become *the* leading power in a strictly divided two-sided Cold-War-world), Osborn stood for the continuity of the pre-World War II "population"-people, as did John D. Rockefeller 3rd himself. In contrast to those who would hold this office afterwards, Osborn did not see himself as a professional expert in one of the fields of knowledge that are influential within the realm of reproduction: demographics, statistics, biology, genetics, etc. Nor did he feel insulted by this lack of expertise, such as when he was called a "very well-informed amateur demographer." Instead, he agreed, feeling that this described exactly what he considered to be the level of his competence.<sup>3</sup> Osborn was succeeded in 1959 by Frank Notestein, who had been in the field of "population" since the late 1920s and was head of the Office of Population Research at Princeton, one of the first nuclei of academic population research. He had coined the theory of "demographic transition," which served as the *leitmotif* of population theory for several postwar decades. Notestein was one of the world's most influential producers and distributors of scientific knowledge on "population" issues. When Notestein retired in 1968, he remained a member of the board of the Council and head of the Office for the Research of Population, and thus continued to be an important actor in the field. His successor, Bernard Berelson, was a renown

behavioral scientist and an expert in statistical surveys on subjects as diverse as voting behavior and reproductive behavior. Berelson was followed in 1976 by George Zeidenstein, who, as head of the Ford Foundation's program in Bangladesh, had experience in the population field. He differed from his predecessors, who were reknown scientists and well-established at elite American universities. Zeidenstein was more like a "field worker" in population policy who had gained a high reputation among countries with which he had worked. In addition to his experience in Bangladesh, he worked as deputy head for the Ford Foundation in charge of Asia and the Pacific.

At this stage of my research I can only describe what I tentatively call the different successive phases within the perceptions and policies of the Population Council; these periods are strongly related to the terms of its chief officers. I am not able, yet, to offer any thesis about the motives for these changes or how they are to be contextualized within broader political, cultural or social changes.

I have already mentioned Fred Osborn's long career in the field of population. He had been a member of various associations and boards. Most significantly, he was a senior officer within the American Eugenics Association from 1928 until his death in 1973. Within the RAC's files as far as I could see them, I found no hint at the reasoning or of the procedure of Osborn's appointment: His dedication to eugenics seems at odds with pre-war attitudes of, for example, John D. Rockefeller 3rd. Though he had supported eugenic circles with comparatively small amounts of money, Rockefeller and some of his officers had serious doubts concerning the scientific foundation of eugenics. The choice of Frederick Osborn as executive vice president of the Population Council, however, seems to be a clear hint towards the Council's projected aims. There seems to be some tension between the philanthropic commitment to humanist tenets and this eugenic after World War II.

The Population Council followed basically three directions during its early years. Continuing pre-war Rockefeller concerns in the field of medical research, the Council aimed at the investigation of the basic biological processes related to reproduction in order to find a more efficient contraceptive for both sexes, which seems significant in the light of later debates. Second, the Council supported studies in human genetics. From a comparative perspective, what seems significant in the US-American discourse is the clear transitional character of the relationship between eugenics and genetics, while in the German-speaking countries historical research and disciplinary self-representation tend to make a clear distinction between the two. It might not be very far-fetched to assume that the Nazi experience is the reason for these different "archeologies." One of Frederick Osborn's favorite projects during the first years of the Population Council were plans for a study of twins, a project that is significant for the post-war development.<sup>4</sup> As early as 1952, Osborn - together with others - initiated plans for a "large twin study" that involved major university research centers and the American Eugenic Society. The study was intended to investigate the inheritance of intelligence and its measurement. The people involved were clearly part of the post-war eugenics circle, which extended to Europe, especially Great Britain and the Scandinavian countries. The plans for the twins study were situated within a discussion about "population quality," which was a major field of

concern to the Council under Osborn's leadership: "As I told you," he wrote to Rockefeller, "I know these people and have a very high regard for the work they are doing and the way they are going at it. They are in a field which nobody else likes to be too much associated with, and their work has been done quietly and effectively."<sup>5</sup> Though Osborn tried several times to get the study under way, it was never undertaken. Problems in personnel ended the project but point to something more important and less accidental: Robert L. Thorndike, who was chosen to lead the study, withdrew from the job due to serious doubts about its feasibility. He did not believe that intelligence could be reliably measured due to the complexities of child psychology.<sup>6</sup> His reasoning points to a shift within the scientific world: Eugenic attitudes became a less legitimate world view - at least in some parts of the Western world - towards the end of the 1950s.

This brings me back to my earlier observation about the gradual transition from eugenics to genetics in the U.S. What seems remarkable in this context is the fact that I did not find any traces of a reflexive discussion of Nazi population policies within the files. From my point of view this omission is quite puzzling: The results of the Nazi "qualitative population policies" should have been known to those who had been so active in the field. Nonetheless the annual reports of the Council's activities from 1952 to 1955 quite openly talk about "natural selection" with respect to humans and express their optimism about the related sciences: "the study of human heredity has perhaps made the greatest progress in recent years." And the Council appreciates that "heredity clinics are becoming an accepted corollary to maternal health services"<sup>7</sup> without even mentioning the related ambiguities. That the association of questions of "population quality" and Nazi policies was not bizarre to all contemporaries illustrates a point mentioned by Donald Critchlow: During the discussions on the Council's future charter, John D. Rockefeller 3rd wanted to include a plank in favor of research that would encourage parents "who are above the average of intelligence, quality of personality and affection" to have larger families. Thomas Parran, the former Surgeon General and an active Catholic, objected: "Frankly, the implications of this . . . could readily be misunderstood as a Nazi master race philosophy."<sup>8</sup> This inability to connect eugenic impulses with discredited Nazi programs illustrates the deeply ambivalent relationship between concepts of human progress and betterment and the attempts to govern and consequently select human reproduction. U.S. history in the twentieth century, lacking the clear disruptions experienced in European, especially German and Austrian history, offers an interesting opportunity to further explore this ambivalence. Rockefeller philanthropy, with its dedication to human progress on the basis of scientific knowledge - thanks also to the well-kept archival sources - offers an example of the nuances, the transitions and modifications within an ideological framework that oscillates between totalitarian breeding or selection policies and humanist efforts for social reform.

In addition to programs rooted in Rockefeller activities prior to the war, the Population Council came under the influence of a new field - demography - that emerged during the Council's early years. The Council began its first demographic research projects in Puerto Rico, Japan, India, and Egypt. Population problems abroad were seen strictly in a quantitative perspective, an approach which differed from considerations of population in the U.S. High population growth in "third-world countries" was perceived as a threat to

peace and the future development of humankind. Similar to the early proponents of birth control after World War I, like Margaret Sanger, the officers of the Population Council and most people in the population field found the motives for World War II in mounting population pressures. The Nazi propaganda about "Volk ohne Raum" (people without space) seemed to confirm this argument. The reduction of population growth - at first mainly in Asia and Central America - was seen as the main remedy against social conflict. During its first years the Council under Osborn worked on the premise that people in "third-world countries" (as well as lower-class people in the U.S., who also tended to have more children than members of the middle and upper class) inherently and naturally wanted to reduce the number of their children, and that the only obstacle to this were "traditions" or "religion" and lack of knowledge. Therefore the Council's activities were aimed at the production and distribution of adequate scientific knowledge via fellowships, international conferences, research in oversea areas and, together with the United Nations, the establishment of training centers in Santiago, Chile and in Bombay, India. During the following decades this international, demographically oriented branch of the Council would become its most important and most controversial one.

Though the archival sources hold no traces on any discussion about Frank Notestein's selection to succeed Frederick Osborn in 1959, a remarkable shift within the attitudes and policies of the Council can be observed. Due to an expansion of its funding as the Council gained the support of the Ford Foundation, the Council could now develop action programs in many parts of the "third world." References to "qualitative population aspects" vanished almost completely from the Council's rhetoric in favor of "quantitative" arguments. Although the annual reports show that the Council continued to fund the American Eugenic Society with a few thousand dollars a year, eugenic or "qualitative" arguments lost their influence among the Council's senior officials. Instead the model of "modernization" became the single, most powerful argument for the reduction of population growth in Asia and Latin America. Notestein had a clear vision of what modernization should be for "underdeveloped" countries, and he designed a path to modernity that he meant as a model for all "underdeveloped" countries to follow. Within the Cold War dichotomy it came as no big surprise that this was the model of a Western market economy. With respect to preferred lifestyles, the vision that Notestein and his collaborators promoted can also be characterized as "fordist": a consumer society, at least to a modest extent, that favors specific, originally European bourgeois, white middle-class, 20th century family formations. In order to build to modernity through modernization the "underdeveloped" countries had to reduce their population growth. "All improvements in well-being must come from the margins by which economic growth exceeds population growth," the Council argued.<sup>9</sup> At a time when Hugh Moore's *Population Bomb*<sup>10</sup> and other rather hysterical-sounding horror scenarios were attracting attention, Notestein's Population Council kept following a scientific point of view and thus fit very well into the "objective" tradition of Rockefeller philanthropy.

During Notestein's term an additional shift took place which would prove to be most far-reaching. In addition to the dissemination of knowledge and techniques, another prerequisite was seen as necessary for the spread of birth control: an easily applicable and cheap contraceptive. I have already mentioned that the Population Council and other

Rockefeller philanthropies supported broad basic as well as applied research in the biology of reproduction. On this score their concern intersected with that of the feminist birth control movement, which for decades had sought a contraceptive which could be used effectively by lower-class and uneducated people and people in rural areas.<sup>11</sup> While the birth control-movement favored an oral contraceptive during the 1950s and finally succeeded in developing the "pill," the Population Council took another path. It revived the National Committee on Maternal Health in order to test different devices and to conduct its own research. When an efficient, cheap and easy to handle "intra-uterine device" (IUD) finally was developed, Notestein supported its use enthusiastically. In the argument for its use appears again a remarkable tension: On the one hand, to legitimize the Council's oversea efforts, Notestein pointed to the propensity of women in the "underdeveloped" countries to use birth control whenever they could get it. On the other hand, he and his senior officials obviously understood that a clear advantage of the IUD was that, once implanted, it kept working for several years without any further action by the user. The conclusion seems clear that Notestein mistrusted the results of his statistical surveys. Though in his public rhetoric he insisted on the Western way to modernity as clearly the most attractive and natural one, his doubts must have been substantial, given the Council's extensive efforts to promote the use of the IUD in "underdeveloped" countries.

Those hidden doubts, as opposed to their open expression, mark the main difference in the policies and attitudes of the Council after 1968, when Bernard Berelson succeeded Notestein. As a result of the broadened discussion over population policy that the Population Council and other actors within the population field had always called for, more complex and differentiated perspectives on population problems entered the public debate. In reaction to criticism from "third world" countries who called for economic development rather than for population reduction, the language of Berelson and his senior officials became more cautious. Notestein's reliance on statistically aggregated figures and tables slowly gave way to reasoning that questioned the democratic quality of strict population policies in foreign countries. The people whose reproductive behavior was at the center of all the efforts to reduce fertility rates were conceptualized in a more complex way: as individuals living under specific economic, social and cultural conditions that constituted the framework for their various decisions, including the decision to have (more) children. This meant that the focus of research shifted slightly towards psychological determinants and consequences of fertility.

Looking at the Council's foreign programs during this period, however, such a shift is hardly traceable at the present stage of my analysis. The Council reacted to the disappointments of Notestein's approach. With innovations in the field of contraceptive devices and the extensive spread of IUDs in Latin America, Asia and Africa, it had become clear that one should not assume that women everywhere were eager to reduce the number of their children. The Council's answer was an international hospital-based "postpartum program" that officials later called the "PC's most successful family planning program."<sup>12</sup> Under this program, women who had come to hospitals to give birth were approached right after labor with the suggestion of having an IUD inserted. The assumption behind this program was the (obviously realistic) idea that right after giving

birth women were highly motivated to accept birth control measures because this was a time in which women "never wanted to get pregnant again." Such an attitude did not exactly take seriously the claim for a woman's right to control her body.

When - after a long search and serious conflicts between a younger generation among Rockefeller's staff and the former senior representatives of the Population Council, like Notestein and Berelson - George Zeidenstein was elected as successor to Berelson in 1975, the debate over the contradictions between humanist ideals and the practice towards underprivileged people abroad as well as within the U.S. had entered global political discussions. The debate on "population" had finally left the secluded circles of "population" experts and elite political networks in the field. The representatives of "third world" countries voiced criticism of the insensitive policies of the Western powers, which tried to avoid the question of the global distribution of wealth. The arguments of those who called for a more comprehensive concept of development than "modernization" met with those who proclaimed "women's rights" in the public realm. As a result, the chorus who constituted the "population field" became more heterogeneous, less uniform, more open, and less secluded. Now it contained conflicting voices, with different agencies that hardly seemed to fit under one goal. The prolonged search within the Population Council for a successor to Berelson can be viewed as one sign of the altered structure of the population field. Supporters described the new candidate, George Zeidenstein, as "not patronizing," a man of "sensitivity, rapport, patience, [and a] capacity to listen."<sup>13</sup> Such descriptions make the change obvious: Nowhere in the files are Notestein, Berelson or "General Osborn" described in similar fashion. Clearly a new generation had emerged within the ranks of the senior institutions in the population field. John Lewis, a Princeton-economist who was questioned about possible candidates during the selection process, said about Zeidenstein: "George is very good -- he is 'new look' in terms of the development field. He's a product of the sixties and the late sixties. Grew his hair long for a while. Very 'with it.'"<sup>14</sup>

I have tried to show that the periodization of the Council's history according to the succession of vice presidents coincides with distinguishable periods in terms of the perception of problems and development of policy. A more thorough analysis of the evidence has to proceed in at least two directions: First, the contradictions, the nuances, the gradual development within the periods I have identified must be scrutinized. Second, a theoretization seems desirable on the relationship between the changes and shifts I am writing about and any broader "trajectories of modernity."<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, "Reproduktive Freiheit: Jenseits des Rechts der Frau auf Selbstbestimmung," In Elisabeth List and Herlinde Studer, eds., *Denkverhältnisse. Feminismus und Kritik* (Frankfurt/Main, 1989), p. 170.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Adele E. Clarke, *Disciplining Reproduction: Modernity, American Life Sciences, and "the Problems of Sex"* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1998); Donald T. Critchlow, ed., *The Politics of Abortion and Birth Control in Historical Perspective* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1996); Donald T. Critchlow, *Intended Consequences: Birth Control, Abortion, and the Federal Government in Modern America*, (New York: Oxford, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Population Council Archives, National Committee on Maternal Health, RG IV3B4.4, Box 87, Folder 1640, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York.

<sup>4</sup> Population Council, RG IV3B4.2, Boxes 39, 40.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Osborn to JDR 3rd, October 2, 1956, Population Council, RG IV3B4.2, Box 10.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Robert L. Thorndike to Osborn, January 3, 1957, Population Council, RG IV3B4.2, Box 10.

<sup>7</sup> Population Council, *Annual Report 1955* (New York, 1955), p. 9

<sup>8</sup> Quoted after Critchlow, *Intended Consequences*, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Population Council, *Annual Report 1961*, (New York, 1961), p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh Moore, *The Population Bomb* (New York, 1959).

<sup>11</sup> Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Bureau of Social Hygiene, American Birth Control League 1929-, Committee on Maternal Health misc., Series 3, Box 7, Folder 174, Committee on Maternal Health, 1930-34: File Memorandum RT [Ruth Topping, Bureau of Social Hygiene], September 22, 1931, Subject: Crew Spermicide Study.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Anna Quandt to Siri Melchior, UNFPA, March 26, 1976, Rockefeller Family Archives, Record Group 17, Associates: Joan Dunlop, Box 8.

<sup>13</sup> Memorandum, October 10, 1975, Rockefeller Family Archives, RG 17, Associates: Joan Dunlop, Box 9, folder Background material for Board decision on new president.

<sup>14</sup> Memorandum From Dunlop To: the Files, Aug. 19, 1975, Rockefeller Family Archives, RG 17, Associates: Joan Dunlop Box 9, folder Background material for Board decision on new president.

<sup>15</sup> Goran Therborn, *European Modernity and Beyond: The Trajectory of European Societies, 1945-2000* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1995).