



CENTRO ITALO-TEDESCO

DEUTSCH-ITALIENISCHES ZENTRUM

Competing Numbers. Population Statistics in Use **in the 19th and 20th Century**

Villa Vigoni, Loveno di Menaggio, Italy, 17-19 June 2014.

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(for the Research Network “Population, Knowledge, Order, Transformation: Demography and Politics in the Twentieth Century in Global Perspective”)

The concept of “population” in many ways owes its existence to statistics. In the course of the 20th century, demographers and other experts repeatedly warned of over- or underpopulation and of ever growing (or declining) numbers. During our talk on “*Competing numbers*”, we suggest to look at the *use* of population statistics in different political and social contexts, investigating how population statistics became indispensable argumentative tools in the political sphere, academic circles and the mass media from the late 19th century onwards.

Concentrating on the question of how experts and non-experts alike used and presented numbers in different public arenas, the conference puts an emphasis on the circulation rather than the production of statistical knowledge. We want to follow the actors who produce the data, but even more so those who *use* them in different contexts - sometimes even as “*Competing numbers*”. We thus hope to discuss how the knowledge they produced *travelled* and how population was represented with the help of statistics in different local or social spheres.

Our talk brings together historians who specialize in different world regions in order to investigate the communication of expert knowledge in a transnational perspective. Comparing the intersection between the mass media, political arenas and scientific expertise in different national, imperial and international contexts, the conference aims to historicize the coproduction of lay knowledge and expert knowledge in the modern age of mass media.

It is a common topos in current academic debates that modern societies were media societies and have to be investigated as such. In preceding years, historians have become increasingly interested in the question of how the mass media and changing forms of communication influenced political as well as social and scientific practices. Referring to these debates, the conference uses the example of population statistics in use in order to explore the intricate relationship between the media, science, and politics. While the intersection of political decision-making and academic expertise has been a major topic of research throughout the last twenty years, the question of how academic expertise corresponded with media coverage as well as political activities is under-researched. The conference thus hopes to give new insights into the “medialization” of politics and the academic sphere in the 20th century.

The history of population knowledge is a history of transfer and entanglement. But the question of how this knowledge travelled needs to be further explored in order to fully grasp its transnational history. Offering a numeric rather than a semantic language, statistics in their various form suggested a universalism beyond words. As numbers, they allowed for comparisons – and could be presented in compact graphs and tables which represented scientific thoroughness, and thus credibility. So how did journalists, political actors and experts make use of numeric knowledge, how did they present and manipulate demographic figures – and what do we learn about the relationship between political decision-making and knowledge production when investigating the public use of statistics over the course of the 20th century? What, on the other hand, does such a perspective add to the history of population knowledge? Not only did numbers travel across continents, they also traversed boundaries between disciplines and societal spheres. Development experts, demographers, bureaucrats, sociologists, doctors or politicians as well as international organizations, churches, empires or states – a large range of actors used statistics in order to establish their worldview, discover problems or legitimate their actions. At the same time, they were themselves influenced by social facts. With regard to these different actors, the participants are asked to choose one “population figure” and discuss its circulation in different spheres, thereby analysing its various uses. Participants are invited to present papers in which they either a) follow a set of quantitative data from its genesis to its transfer into different spheres, or b) concentrate on a social fact – a diagnosed societal problem – asking how the said problem was discovered, observed and seemingly resolved through statistical argumentation.