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Book Review: Twentieth Century Population Thinking: A Critical Reader of Primary Sources edited by The Population Knowledge Network

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THE POPULATION KNOWLEDGE NETWORK (ED.)

Twentieth Century Population Thinking: A Critical Reader of Primary Sources

New York: Routledge, 2015. 246 p. \$145.00.

The Population Knowledge Network consists of thirteen historians and social scientists, eleven of whom are European, whose goal is to study the history of demography in the twentieth century through “the lens of the history of knowledge and science together with the lens of social and political history.” Each of this Reader’s eight chapters contains both assorted “primary source” materials (posters, brochures, census forms, contraceptive advertisements, oral histories, graphs, and occasional passages from books and articles) and a commentary on how they illustrate some aspect of twentieth-century population thinking. For instance, some of the source material in Chapter 1 (“Statistics, Nationhood and the State”) includes the control list used by Prussian census enumerators in 1905, the 1940 US census instructions for determining race, a 1930 German poster tracing historical life expectancy improvements, a 1913 French neo-Malthusian cartoon depicting Death taking away an unwanted infant, and a 1941 German proposal by the Chief of the SS Race and Settlement Office to develop a database of the health and hereditary characteristics of the past decade’s 200,000 SS applicants. The accompanying commentary includes both a history and a historiography of population statistics that highlight Foucault’s vision of population as central to understanding governmentality and issues of economic and political control. The next four chapters offer interesting discussions of some often-overlooked topics. Chapter 2 treats colonial demography, not focusing on cases of overpopulation fears but on instances where colonial officials worried about depopulation caused by disease and low fertility. Chapter 3 examines “organizations and networks of population thinking” arising in the first half of the twentieth century and includes not only discussion of the IUSIPP (predecessor of the IUSSP) and various birth control organizations but also organizations focusing on sexual research such as the Medical Society for Sexual Science, the International Society for Sexual Research, and the World League for Sexual Reform. Chapter 4

("Population in Space") treats migration, urbanization, and overpopulation but always with a geopolitical focus on the relationship between a people and a particular place. Chapter 5 ("Family, Sexuality, and Gender") looks at government efforts to control moral values connected to the family, from early-twentieth-century attempts to diminish the prevalence of "criminal families" and promote "fitter families" to later-century attempts to make correctly sized "modern" families the norm. The final three chapters treat population thinking more familiar to demographers, focusing on population and development, contraceptive technology, and population and environment. Some significant kinds of twentieth-century population thinking are not discussed. No mention is made that a discipline of demography with population as its core concept was institutionalized during this century. There also is no discussion of the enhanced political significance that accurate population counts assumed with the rise of representative democracy based on universal suffrage as the century's most legitimate form of government. But overall this volume's commentaries and primary source materials do a fine job of broadening our vision of what constitutes population thinking.—D.H.