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A Demographer at the Cusp between Economics and Sociology: An Interview with David Heer

by Shoshana Grossbard-Shechtman

David M. Heer obtained his Ph.D. in sociology at Harvard in 1958. He has studied many aspects of demography, including fertility, migration, and couple formation. He has taught at the University of California at Berkeley and the Harvard University School of Public Health. He recently retired from the University of Southern California, where he directed the Population Research Laboratory and was a Professor of Sociology. He has written books on social demography and immigration, and has published more than eighty articles in demography. He has collaborated on articles with scholars trained in economics, political economy, public health, sociology, and social work. We collaborated on "The Impact of the Female Marriage Squeeze and the Contraceptive Revolution on Sex Roles and the Women's Liberation Movement in the United States, 1960 to 1975," published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (Heer and Grossbard-Shechtman 1981).

Part I. On the History of Demography

Q. You have been a prominent demographer and sociologist for many years. What do you consider yourself first, a demographer or a sociologist?

A. I prefer to consider myself a demographer rather than a sociologist. That is because I and other demographers are interested in quantitative research, whereas many sociologists do only qualitative research.

Q. What is demography?

A. I would define demography as the study of populations, which would include the composition of existing populations and the study of the components of population change: natality, mortality, in-migration and out-migration.

Q. From the start, demography has been a multidisciplinary field. Can you tell me more about the origin of demography as a science?

A. There have been two principal founders of demography: John Graunt and Thomas Malthus. Graunt was a statistician in 17th Century England. He invented the life table, a major tool in all demographic analysis. Malthus was an economist and an Anglican minister who became very concerned with the question of how population growth

affected human well-being. The first prominent American demographer was Francis Walker. He was the first president of the American Economic Association, and was the first academic to be superintendent for the U.S. Census Bureau (for the 1880 Census). He later became president of M.I.T.

Q. When did demography become an academic discipline in modern universities?

A. The two founders of demography represented two different strands that have come together: formal demography, as represented by Graunt, and social demography, as represented by Malthus. Before World War I, we see the development of demographic methods, particularly by Alfred Lotka, who was born and trained in France and worked as a statistician for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in the U.S. He developed the theory of the stable population, the most important theory in formal demography. Lotka showed that in the case of France, based on current fertility and mortality rates, the stable population would have a negative rate of population growth. This finding was a great concern to French political leaders, who were concerned about France's military power relative to Germany's.

In the early 20th Century in American academia, a leading figure was Walter Wilcox, who taught statistics at Cornell University. Frank Notestein, who in 1936 became the first director of the influential Office of Population Research at Princeton, was trained by Wilcox and had a Ph.D. in economics. Another influential demographer during this period was Joseph Spengler, who obtained a Ph.D. in economics from Ohio State University. He wrote one of the earliest books on U.S. fertility (Spengler 1930).

Another interesting influence on the evolution of demography as an academic specialty is the eugenics movement. Francis Galton in the U.K. and Henry Fairfield Osborn, Frederick Osborn, and Ellsworth Huntington in the U.S. were among the leaders of this movement. They argued that hereditary differences in intelligence and the higher reproduction rates of the less intelligent were highly detrimental to the future of society. Henry Fairfield Osborn, who was a leading biologist and head of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, was a proponent of the idea that there were racial differences in intelligence and wrote a preface to an influential book by Madison Grant (1921): "The passing of the great race, or the racial basis of European history."

Q. So eugenics and demography have been very closely related?

A. In the 1920s and the 1930s eugenicists and demographers were closely allied. Frederick Osborn, the author of a noted textbook on eugenics (Osborn 1940), and Frank Notestein worked together at the Millbank Memorial Fund. Osborn was instrumental in the founding of the Office of Population Research at Princeton in 1936 (Ansley Coale 2000). Racial eugenic theories were then used to justify immigration policies limiting the number of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. Geography is another discipline that is related to demography and that also got heavily involved in eugenics during this period. Among the leading racial eugenicists was Ellsworth Huntington, a respected professor of geography at Yale (see Huntington 1924), who was also a founding member of the Population Association of America. Joseph Spengler openly

opposed the very low quotas for Eastern and Southern Europe. He argued that immigration policy should be based on individual merit, not group merit (see Heer 1996).

Q. The Population Association of America (PAA) was founded in 1931. What academic disciplines and ideologies was it allied with?

A. The membership of the PAA typically represents the major disciplines active in demography at a particular time. The founders of the PAA were active in a variety of disciplines, including public health and biology, actuarial science, economics, statistics, and sociology. Margaret Sanger, the famous birth-control advocate, took a leading role. A predominating influence was an ideology that the poor and less intelligent had too many children, and the wealthy and more intelligent had too few. The first PAA president, Henry Pratt Fairchild, was devoted to two causes: (1) the promotion of birth control, and (2) severe restrictions on immigration to preserve ethnic homogeneity in the United States (Frank Lorimer 1981). Given that not all PAA founders agreed on the same social policies, the original PAA constitution prohibited the organization from endorsing any recommendations concerning population policy (Frank Notestein 1981).

Q. How did this change after World War II? Let us start with the change in composition of the demography profession in terms of academic affiliation.

A. After WWII the influence of sociologists in the PAA grew relatively to that of persons trained in public health or biology.

Q. Was this change associated with an ideological shift?

A. It obviously was associated with a de-emphasis on eugenics. This was to a large extent the result of the holocaust and the denigration of Hitler's racial eugenic views.

Q. How fascinating! Who would have thought that the extermination of European Jewry would have an impact on the nature of demography...

A. There is another Jewish connection in demography. Prior to WWII, there were very few Jewish demographers. Following WWII, a large number of prominent Jewish demographers made their mark. These include both economists and sociologists. In sociology, important contributions were made e.g. by Philip Hauser and Nathan Keyfitz at the University of Chicago, Ronald Freedman at the University of Michigan. In economics, contributions were made by Simon Kuznets, Harvey Leibenstein, Jacob Mincer, Gary Becker, and Julian Simon. Understandingly, none of these Jewish demographers espoused eugenic views. There is an interesting story linking the words of a Jewish rabbi to Julian Simon's conversion from a position favoring governmentally sponsored fertility reduction programs to opposition to such programs. In Simon (1981) he stated that his viewpoint was changed in 1969, when he was reminded of the words of a Jewish chaplain delivering a eulogy over the dead on the battlefield at Iwo Jima: "How many who would have been a Mozart, or a Michelangelo or an Einstein have we buried here?"

Q. Let us get to the topic of the relative influence of economics and sociology on demography before and after WWII. It is clear from what you stated before that economists were extremely influential in demography prior to WWII.

A. In fact, I believe that economists became less influential in demography after WWII. In part, this was the result of the large scale training of demographers by sociology departments at Chicago (by Philip Hauser and Donald Bogue), Wisconsin (by Samuel Stouffer), Michigan (by Ronald Freedman and Amos Hawley), and the University of North Carolina (by Howard Odum and Rupert Vance).

Q. How interesting that during this period the university housing the influential Office of Population Research at Princeton produced demographers trained in economics rather than sociology!

A. And many of these economists became prominent. For instance, Ansley Coale and Leibenstein got their Ph.Ds there. The University of Pennsylvania stands out in that it trained prominent demographers trained in both economics and sociology. Simon Kuznets, who left Penn in 1954, had a major influence both directly through his own work, and indirectly through the work of his disciple Richard Easterlin (Easterlin got his Ph.D. in 1953). An important demographer trained in sociology at Penn is Charles Westoff, who was the head of Princeton's Office of Population Research for many years.

Part II. On Economics and Sociology

Q. What are some of the differences between demographers trained as economists and those trained as sociologists.

A. Demographers who are sociologists have generally not been very much concerned with theory but rather with ascertaining the facts about population. It is a fair statement that most of the theory in social demography has been contributed by economists.

Q. Who do you consider as the major contributors to this theory?

A. There are five economists who have been very important. First, Frank Notestein. He had obtained a Ph.D. in economics at Cornell University in 1927. He is credited for developing the concept of the demographic transition, although Kingsley Davis, who worked under Notestein, coined the term (see Coale 2000). Second, Ansley Coale. He developed a highly influential theory concerning how a reduction in fertility would enhance economic growth. Third, Richard Easterlin. He contributed a very influential explanation of why the post war baby-boom occurred. Fourth, Gary Becker. Becker's models incorporate the opportunity cost of children and make the distinction between quantity and quality of children. Lastly, Alfred Sauvy. This French economist made two important contributions: he showed that (2) the population size that maximized military power was always greater than the population size that maximized the standard of living,

and (2) the economic value of a man was maximized at about age 20, declined to zero at around age 45, and was negative at all ages after age 45.

Q. I certainly agree with your assessment that Becker's theories have been very influential in demography. However, I would like to point out that Jacob Mincer (1963) was the first economist who advanced the theoretical argument for the inclusion of household production time in estimating the cost of children.

A. Most people are aware of Becker's (1965) article on the allocation of time. I take credit for bringing Gary Becker into the membership of the PAA. When was chair of the membership committee in 1982, I wrote Becker a letter inviting him to become a member. I told him "as you are no doubt aware, there are few if any demographers whose name is cited more frequently in the demographic literature than your own." He accepted and has been a member of the PAA ever since. He later received the Irene Taeuber award. I had forgotten about Mincer's work. Why do you think that Mincer's article has been ignored by most demographers?

Q. In fact, Mincer's (1963) article on opportunity costs has been overlooked not only by demographers, but also by economists. In part this has to do with the fact that Becker's article appeared in a major journal, whereas Mincer's appeared in a book read by relatively few people. This differential popularity can also be partially explained by economists' preferences for mathematical modeling. Becker's mathematical model is more sophisticated, in part due to its inclusion of a household production function. Did the fact that economists like elegant mathematical models have anything to do with your decision to get a Ph.D. in sociology and not in economics?

A. When I was an undergraduate at Harvard in the late 1940s, my first major was economics. This was a natural choice for me, for my father, Clarence Heer, was a professor of economics at the University of North Carolina. My father considered himself an institutional economist and had received his Ph.D. at Columbia University under Wesley Clare Mitchell, the founder of the National Bureau of Economic Research. I took two semesters of the elementary economics course at Harvard during my sophomore year. Previously I had taken a course in sociology with George Homans. At the end of my sophomore year I decided to change my major from economics to a major in social relations, a combination of sociology, social psychology, and social anthropology. I switched because I mistrusted the deductive nature of economics, which seemed to be based on unrealistic assumptions such as perfect markets. I preferred sociology because it was more empirical and less deductive.

Q. How interesting that when you were at the margin between economics and sociology, it was Homans who helped you chose sociology rather than economics. Homans must have been very sympathetic to economics, was not he? His social exchange theories look very much like economic theories to me. What is Homans' background?

A. Homans had not been trained in sociology as an undergraduate at Harvard but had majored in English literature. As a graduate student at Harvard he was very influenced

by the Harvard biologist L.J. Henderson, an expert on Vilfredo Pareto (Henderson 1935). Homans took Henderson's seminar on Pareto in the early 1930s.

Q. Pareto distinguished what he called 'ophelimity' and 'utility.' While utility is totally subjective, Pareto believed that ophelimity can, in principle, be inferred by comparing different behaviors of the same person that have effects occurring in the economy (see Jurgen Backhaus 2001, p.25). Is not there a clear connection between Homans' concept of social exchange and Pareto's concept of utility outside of ophelimity, i.e. regarding effects that affect society outside the economy?

A. You seem to be right. Homans acknowledged his intellectual debt to Pareto by writing his first book about the Italian economist (Homans and Charles Curtis 1934).

Q. How about Talcott Parsons? Vernon Ruttan, a prominent economist who has recently become interested in sociological contributions to the study of economic development, finds his work very interesting (see his chapter in this book). Parsons was also one of your professors. Was he also influenced by economics?

A. He certainly was. In fact, Parsons was trained as an economist. His doctorate in economics was issued by the University of Heidelberg in Germany. Parsons began his career analyzing the theories of economic development pioneered by German economists/sociologists Werner Sombart, Max Weber, and Karl Marx.

Q. When did Parsons become a sociologist?

A. He gradually became a sociologist. He started at Harvard in 1927 as an instructor in economics. His first semester at Harvard coincided with the start of the Committee on Sociology and Social Ethics, an undergraduate program. Within a short time, Parsons, who soon made known his own interests in sociology, was appointed secretary to that committee. You have to realize that the sociology department at Harvard did not exist until the fall of 1931, when it absorbed the previous department of Social Ethics. Parsons then transferred to sociology (see Charles Camic 1991).

Q. What about Simon Kuznets, the Nobel prize winning economist? Did he have an influence on you?

A. Kuznets was a friend of my father. They studied together at Columbia. However, Kuznets did not come to Harvard until 1958, after I had completed my Ph. D there. Kuznets is an important contributor to what we know about the relationship between economic growth and population growth. His first demographic work dealt with the impact of immigration on economic growth in the United States.

Q. In recent years, economists and sociologists have worked together on many research projects in demography, as I show in my chapter in this book. Do you welcome that trend?

A. Yes, I do. This collaboration between economists and sociologists active in demography was originally made possible by the small size of the PAA. Given that small size, at the annual meetings there were no concurrent sessions. Obviously, this enabled demographers from each academic discipline to hear the contributions from all other disciplines. Currently, there are many concurrent sessions at each annual meeting of the PAA. It is possible, therefore, for sociologists/demographers to ignore the contributions of economists/demographers, and vice-versa. I think that the PAA should have more plenary panel sessions in which both economists and sociologists will be represented.

Q. Using your experience as a demographer, but extrapolating to other subject matters as well, what can you say about past and future of relations between economics and sociology?

A. I think that quantitative sociologists have been very much attracted to the rational choice models of economics. James Coleman, who was one of the leading sociologists in the United States after World War II, became the leading spokesperson for rational choice theories. He and Gary Becker led a seminar on rational choice at the University of Chicago for many years. I am not happy to see quantitative sociologists under attack now. There currently is a trend for many post-modern sociologists to attack rational choice models, sometimes viciously. This helps explain why Lawrence Iannaccone, the author of the chapter on religion in your book, experienced a need to counter-attack sociologists of religion. The post-modernist wave in sociology is mainly due to the generation that was in college during the Vietnam war. When this generation retires, there will be much more respect for quantitative sociology, and more sociologists may read Coleman's (1990) monumental work *Foundations of Social Theory*.

Q. Thank you for these fascinating insights.

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