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SEMINAR ON HISTORICAL DEMOGRAPHY - CELADE
Santiago, 23 - 27 July 1973

Santiago, Chile
August 1973

BIBLIOTECA "GIORGIO MERTARA"
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A seminar on Historical Demography was held from July 23 to 27, 1973, at CELADE headquarters in Santiago. This meeting was the culmination of a first experimental and exploratory phase in the vast field in which demography and history meet. In fact, since 1965 CELADE had had varied, though not constant, concerns with the study of demographic facts from the past, sponsoring seminars on methodology in this field, receiving postgraduate fellow students in Economic History, and delivering special courses on basic demography for historians.

From a workshop in which the methodology proposed by Professor Louis Henry was examined, it was decided to explore more thoroughly the field of historical demography. It was agreed to start from fundamental questions, which being resolved in greater or lesser degree would make several of its researchers familiar with the problems, techniques, and possibilities of the historical point of view on the study of population. The services of the historian Professor Rolando Mellafe, expert in the Latin American Records as well as in the area of current historiography, were required. In later meetings an area of work was programmed for the year 1972, a programme which was devoted to obtain a panorama of the documentary sources available for historical demography.

Thus, a program of bibliographical tracing and localization of documents useful to historical demography in the seven countries selected for study was organized. These countries were Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru. The pre-selection was made on the basis of

their demographic past and several present conditions favorable to the investigation to be attempted. The work was accomplished basically by correspondents and collaborators who received a guide book on the methodological aspect of the document as well as on the way of collecting sources and estimating the quality and condition of the documentary repositories to be visited. CELADE's aims when concerning itself with this protracted archival search can be summarized in the following points:

1. To have descriptive and representative samples, from one or several places, of abundant written testimony on population in the past;
2. to possess a qualitative description of the type of data that these sources contain;
3. to use the qualitative and quantitative descriptions of the documents to try out several historical-demographic methodologies;
4. to become acquainted with the existence and conditions of access to one or more regions well supplied with historical-demographic material, with views to an eventual program of research; and
5. to have a general idea of the preservation of these archives and the existing facilities for consulting them.

Its exploratory spirit and the fact that it is the first project of this kind carried out in Latin America could have produced uncertain results. However, the work was completed as planned, although with some errors and omissions stemming especially from remoteness of coordination and from the poor condition and dispersion of the records. In less than a year, an appreciable quantity of local reports that described the useful documentation in rather extensive areas of the region was made available. At this point of the project it was necessary to make an evaluation of what had been accomplished and, even more important, it seemed useful to reflect on the

real possibilities and the significance of future activity in historical demography in Latin America. To do this CELADE called a meeting -which we will report here on- and invited qualified researchers from Europe, the United States, and several Latin American countries.

It is important to emphasize that the seminar organized by CELADE attained more than to evaluate the research on its final stage, to consider other numerous questions that were generally in accord with the objectives set forth in the conversations preceding the initiation of the project. Thus, we could say that there were at least three areas with different thematic content, although they were not perfectly explicit in the material programmed for each session.

- a) Examination of the reports, with methodological implications,
- b) present and future of historical demography on the Continent, and
- c) preservation of the documents and its accesibility.

The seminar was carried out in an atmosphere of great understanding and frankness, which made it possible to adapt the program to the needs of each topic. However, the procedure accepted by all was first to discuss the reports by countries, adding and taking out what appeared qualitatively and quantitatively useful for the document, but trying to separate the strictly methodological questions that were to be discussed on meetings devoted entirely to that subject. Topics related to the examination of the present and future situation of historical demography were left for the last sessions, thereby confusing them to a certain extent with the final recommendations. The discussion on the preservation of the documents was brought up following the meetings devoted to the methodological problems.

The five days of sessions left a very interesting scope, which we shall synthesize in the following paragraphs,

grouping the subjects covered according to the above mentioned areas rather than to the order they were given in the meetings.

a) The discussion of the reports and of a summary which had been specially prepared, allowed to complete the regional panorama of the existing documents and the recognition of other areas not contemplated in the original investigation as well as of research work that had been carried out, or are in progress, on regions included in the sample. From the study on documentary typology clear indications resulted for possible lines of demographic investigation, as expressed in the regional information contained in many of the reports. Priorities were not established, but the lack of studies on migration and on vital population movements were emphasized.

Considerations on the quality, variety, and quantity of data that are possible to obtain with sufficient abundance from the remaining documents of the colonial period, necessarily brought a repeated methodological discussion. This fell especially upon the techniques of collection and elaboration. Again the old question of the inadequacy of the methodology currently used to study and analyze societies demographically different to the ones of Latin America arose, question based on the diverse ways of historically keeping the direct and indirect records on population, together with the enormous variety and discontinuity of such records. With respect to this at least three fundamental questions were clearly established:

- 1) The necessity of putting together a methodological manual adapted to historical Latin American reality.
- 2) The utility of unifying typologically the variety of documents and perhaps even of moving forward with a project of codification in this respect, and
- 3) the convenience of giving priority to several sectors of documents in restricted monographic investigations, without necessarily attempting to specify all the possibilities of

demographic analysis focussing then on a determined town or area. This important suggestion would contradict the traditional tendency of historical demography not only in the Continent but also in Europe.

It should be pointed out that the documentary variables noted above, and that apparently could be a disturbing factor in points 1) and 3), are only regional modalities from single patterns and uniformities demanded by the Spanish and Portuguese Crowns for the better administration of their colonies. The documentary variety would then be in great measure counteracted by administrative unity.

b) By examining the present and future state of the study on historical demography in Latin America, a total lack of coordination in the groups or persons dedicated to this study, became very clear. This lack of communication involves other problems such as the lack of uniformity in the methods and the waste of cumulative methodological experience. Thus, there is a great loss of effort and experience and the results of such investigations cannot be compared among themselves.

In accordance with these problems, the majority of the participants present at the Working Group, complained of the enormous difficulties they must suffer to obtain financial assistance to carry out the research work which is normally expensive and long term. Together with the poor resources, the absence of technical assistance was the other great deficiency mentioned in this sense. It was mentioned that a good number of semi-elaborated papers, and even some already finished ones, have never been published or the authors did not want to publish them because they were aware they needed the advice of a specialized demographer. Others, who did not pretend to undertake a complete demographic analysis, had never published the results of their investigations simply due to lack of resources.

All the problems mentioned here call to the urgency of creating or taking advantage of an already existing institution with a good internal organization and technical staff as well as financial stability and international connections and that could sponsor, move, and coordinate the scattered and disordered efforts of historical demography. Those present at the meeting deliberations unanimously requested CELADE to assume this role.

Previous to the conversations on this subject, and during them, CELADE had very clearly expressed through its Director and other representatives that it was not CELADE's specific work to have important concern in historical demography and that it could not assume a constant initiative that excluded other institutions in this field. However, CELADE's interest in the little-defined and little-known scope of historical demography was greatly shown. It is not merely a scientific curiosity but also the necessity to broaden the field of studies on population changes and to attempt methods of demographic analysis in societies which due to poor quantitative data as well as for their stage of development could have had a great resemblance with some regions in the Continent. Therefore, CELADE temporarily accepted the role of moving -as has been doing until now- the organization of historical demography studies with the faith, or at least the hope, that in a near future this work should be undertaken by other organizations. It was made clear that the ideal was to have an active co-participation more than a single directorate.

c) The preservation of documents and access to records was another of the topics discussed in the meeting, taking into account that when they were mentioned it was understood they were not organized documentary repositories but an accumulation of documents without any order nor care on their preservation. This discussion rotated on three points necessarily dependent among them: the lack of files to house the great quantity of useful papers, especially the religious ones; the disorganiza-

tion of the already established records, where there is a lack of rational organization, as indexes, guides, etc.; the little accessibility to some records and, finally, the dispersion of many of the repositories. These last observations affect especially the religious records, which include important testimonies such as the vital population movements during the period.

The last session was devoted to the conclusions and recommendations. A Latin American Coordinating Committee was created which would be represented by Professor María Luiza Marcilio of Brazil, Professor Nicolás Sánchez Albornoz of the New York University, and Professor Rolando Mellafe of Chile; a representative of Mexico would join then afterwards. The Committee would be in charge of coordinating and moving efforts so as to improve the research conditions in the field of historical demography, publishing an Information Bulletin whose publication and distribution would be momentarily CELADE's responsibility.

CELADE also offered to promote the preservation of the documents useful to demography, for which, among other things, would improve the plan for creating a Data Bank for this material. Finally, and as a high priority task, CELADE would attempt an experimental pilot research project on Historical Demography in Latin America. This project would be structured around four ideas:

- 1) Exploitation of investigations in progress or already completed, which would imply technical assistance,
- 2) Initiation of new research work in more than one place of the region.
- 3) Research and tentative application of new methodologies.
- 4) Methodological divulgement through seminars, meetings, courses, and the publication of a manual.