

## Censuses in focus: recent transformations, sociopolitical issues, and methodological innovations

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Conducting demographic censuses is central to Modern States. Demographic censuses target population knowledge and refer to the importance of governmentality for the State<sup>1</sup> and reflexive modernity<sup>2</sup>. In this field, the book *The global politics of census taking: quantifying populations, institutional autonomy, innovation*, edited by Walter Bartl, Christian Suter, and Alberto Veira Ramos, aims to analyze the 2020 round of censuses based on a transdisciplinary debate. As population and its categories are the main denominators of public policies and censuses are key surveys to understand population states and changes related to health and disease patterns, the work is highly relevant to public health. Moreover, household health surveys are central in Brazil<sup>3</sup>, and their challenges are related to those that occur in census research.

In the work, censuses are a State's artifact, which allows recognizing and transforming its population, making groups visible/invisible under social classifications and constituting the society they help define. However, one of its limitations is that censuses are treated relatively isolatedly: the broader discussion about their role in national statistical and data systems is only partially considered. Like censuses, other household surveys and administrative records, when used together, allow the grasping of detailed and longitudinal social outlooks, as is done for analyzing social determinants of health<sup>4</sup>.

The production is structured around three questions, gathering academics and technicians from statistics-producing institutions in the global South and North. The first addresses group representations and the (non)use of ethnic-racial categories and religious affiliation in censuses. The question is answered based on the exclusion-inclusion dynamics in a recognition policy. The second focuses on institutional autonomy, including statistical capacity, the importance of trust,

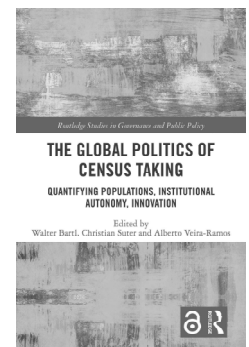
and the issue of political interference. The third part analyzes trajectories of socio-material and methodological innovations, highlighting local dynamics and practice-oriented approaches.

Thus, we stress the relevance of information policy, which dialogues with international standardization efforts and local issues, typical conflicts of the different stages of development and globalization. Given the 2020 round, the book also considers the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, political and budgetary uncertainties, the monitoring of the 2030 Agenda, and controversies over the exclusion of population groups.

The first section, "The politics of ethnoracial categories", addresses the increased production of ethnoracial demographic data in Latin America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the forms of representation in India. Not by chance, the use of the category in Latin America derived from political struggles, with consequences for the production of subjectivities. The theme is central in Brazil, a country unequal in multiple dimensions, and with the relevance of race for health and well-being conditions<sup>5</sup>. The Brazilian experience exemplifies such trajectories, including questions in the census, subsequent production of studies on inequalities, and the development of affirmative action policies. Thus, as redistributive programs are implemented, controversies over population classifications grow and give rise to criticism, such as a potentially polarized or fragmented society. The Indigenous issue also receives special attention in chapter three. In a comparative analysis of education, becomes clear that the identification category had been neglected on the elaboration of national education plans. These two chapters thus denote the risks of not continuing to produce ethnic-racial data, either due to the conflicts that the information generates or the lack of related public policies.

The second chapter explains how creating fixed social categories in the census of the colonial period in India shaped relationships and identities. The expanded caste category in the census, for example, outside of local contexts, led to the creation of new castes, which did not reflect the complex social reality of the country and fostered competition for resources and privileges.

The book's second section, "The politics of institutional autonomy", presents five chapters with diverse experiences of census operations in both hemispheres, in contexts of both consolidated operations and ones with operational barriers, considering data collection and production processes under global de-



mographic and social uncertainties. Furthermore, the institutional complexity of the agencies is highlighted, exemplified by political conflicts regarding the production and dissemination of demographic data, as observed in Ecuador, Nigeria, and Ukraine, and institutional instability, technical errors, and political interventions, which compromise and feed back into the lack of reliability in the surveys.

The chapters present emblematic cases of significant attempts at political intervention in the census by conservative governments. In the United States, institutional changes to the 2020 Census affected its operation, significantly harming the participation of minorities, such as immigrants, despite resistance from civil society and activists. The judicialization of the process at the national level highlighted the role of political power in conducting the census. In Brazil, political intervention allegedly manifested itself primarily through changes in the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics management and budget cuts for the 2020 Census. This scenario generated broad debate involving parliament, civil society, and the judiciary.

Exemplified by the experience of the Latin American Observatory of Demographic Censuses, social participation emerges as a crucial aspect in the production and use of population data in this continent. The shared experiences converged towards the defense of transparent and high-quality population censuses that can consider society's complexity and strengthen research institutions.

Finally, the third section, "The politics of socio-technical and methodological innovations", considers the trajectories of innovations per the national sociopolitical specificities. The register-based census is analyzed for Spain and Germany. In 2021, the former became the largest country to conduct a census in this way. The latter is on track to have the subsequent censuses follow the model. In these nations, the importance of using administrative registers, data-matching techniques covering thematic and population coverage, legal reforms, and increasing digitalization is clear.

In the African context, the cases of Ghana and Cameroon are analyzed. In Ghana, the development and relative success of census operations, a

model on the continent, is exposed. The country exemplifies the relationship between censuses and power structures, which are fundamental in constructing post-colonial national identity. The trajectories, however, are not linear: the 2020 Census brought advances in geospatial data collection but also had the operation's effectiveness at risk after being postponed due to COVID-19 and increased political controversies. The case of Cameroon considers the operation of data collection on mobile phones from the perspective of technological acceptability and global neo-institutionalism. Thus, resistance or support for the adoption of new technologies occurs, given its specificities, the inherent risks and benefits.

The reflections in the conclusion are again related to issues that are central in Brazil, such as the use of ethnic-racial categories in the recognition of health conditions, institutional autonomy, statistical capacity in the face of political interference, and the social contexts that foster innovation. In this case, adopting a census based on records is a promising path for census research with several uses in public health. One example is the greater precision of the denominator of age and cause mortality rates in different periods. Achieving this goal, however, requires technical and legal investments, adopting a culture of pairing and making available administrative, public, and private records. If there is an ambition for a Brazilian statistical system that moves in this direction, including censuses and household and health surveys, the perspectives considered by the book are valuable, not as models, but as trajectories that show possibilities and difficulties.

Finally, the book's stimulus to reflect on the complex relationship between the population, the State, and national statistical institutes in a context of conflicts, distrust in data, and risks to institutional autonomy. However, it needs an analysis that places the topic within the scope of national statistical and data systems. Such an element would allow for even more interesting reflections on the relationship between surveys and data used in public health, adding information for understanding social dynamics and inequalities and proposing public policies.

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