

Current Developments in the West German Census: Has the Census  
Had its Day?

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The collection of demographic and social statistics in West Germany is perhaps rather more efficient and comprehensive than in Britain. Rather than rely solely on the decennial census for population counts and other basic information, the Germans maintain a system of population registration.<sup>1</sup> Both Germans and foreigners are required by law to register themselves at local offices on arrival at a new address and to deregister themselves on leaving an old address. These migration data are used, along with birth and death registration data, to update the population census. In this way, the laender attempt to keep accurate measures of their population sizes, measures which are important in administrative decisions such as the assessment of street and educational costs, the financial adjustment between poorer and richer communities, the delimitation of election districts, etc. More detailed information is obtained annually from the microcensus, which covers 1 per cent of the population. The census is used as a sampling frame.

The next full-scale census in West Germany is due to take place on 27 April 1983. Though the census is not vital to the production of social statistics as such (because the microcensus provides detailed information including income) it is officially regarded as necessary as a means of checking the accuracy and completeness of the population registers. Data from the planned 1983 census, complete with names and addresses, will be used to correct the population registers, which significantly also go by the name of police registers. The use of census data in such a non-confidential way for police purposes has led to massive opposition to the census. The extent of this opposition is evident from the fact that the census administrators have been unable to find enough enumerators to carry out the operation. To remedy this, police officers and tax officials (income is also a census item) are being forced to do the job.

Underlining the importance of obtaining an exact measure of the population size, in other words of including everyone, it is planned that enumerators will be paid a bonus<sup>2</sup> for each person they enumerate who is not already on the population/police register. The role of the census in individually recording rather than merely enumerating the population is thus formalised: it is to be used as a vehicle for rooting out people who for one reason or another have chosen not to register with the police. What is more, it is census enumerators rather than law enforcement or other officials who are obliged to carry out this task. That this is a, if not the, main purpose of the census is made all the more clear by the fact that the bonus is to be doubled if the hitherto unregistered person is a foreigner.

As in most countries in Western Europe, foreigners in West Germany require work and residence permits. The conditions attached to these permits are quite strict: for example, adequate housing must be provided before a foreign worker may bring in dependants. Checks on the size of flats may result in children being deported so that the legal minimum amount of space per person is met. For many foreigners, therefore, the census presents a significant threat, though this aspect has not been prominent in the campaign against the census.

Given this built-in breach of confidentiality, opposition to the census is hardly surprising. The breadth of opposition, however, is

unexpected: it ranges from left groups on the one hand to the police union on the other. This latter source of opposition arises from the difficult position in which the police have found themselves: as enumerators they are bound by law to confidentiality, but as police officers they are equally bound to report any crime they discover, whether or not they are on duty. It is this contradiction, rather than the 'official' breach of confidentiality, that has led the police union to speak out against police involvement in the census, and against the census if their involvement is regarded as essential to its taking place.

Are there parallels to be drawn here between opposition to the census in West Germany and opposition to the proposed 'ethnic question' in the 1981 and planned 1986 census in Britain? In Germany, opposition is mainly being expressed to the fact that the traditionally held confidentiality of the data is quite openly not to be honoured. Though the justification for this is couched in terms of state concerns about the accuracy of official statistics, the process of achieving the completeness of the population/police registers ensures that individuals not already registered (itself an offence) are identified along with whatever 'irregularities' in their status that have led them not to register. For foreigners this linkage is automatically extended to the Central Register of Foreigners, derived from the population/police registers but subject to more cross-checking. It is this Central Register of Foreigners that is used to monitor the foreign population and to check for any irregularities in their status.

In Britain, concerns about possible breaches of confidentiality have surfaced in the opposition shown towards the so-called 'ethnic question'. There are very real concerns that data including ethnic origin could be used to the detriment of black people in Britain; that the information could find its way into other Government departments, in particular the Home Office which is not exactly renowned for its friendly attitude towards members of ethnic minorities.

These manifestations of dissent concerning censuses are part and parcel of the same development in recent years, namely the mounting concern about the powers of the state to control our lives by the maintenance of detailed personal files. Such surveillance has, of course, only become possible with the advent of modern computer technology. We see some recognition of the need to protect confidentiality in the European Convention on Data Processing. Britain has not yet brought her laws into line with this convention, but aims to do so in the Data Protection Bill currently before Parliament. However, the National Council for Civil Liberties maintains that the security of confidential personal files will be eroded under this proposed law. In any event, the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill will, if passed in its present form, allow the police to gain access to supposedly confidential files. This issue affects us all, but is likely to have a greater impact on ethnic minorities because of the insecurity they experience due to police practices and racist and retroactive immigration rules and laws.

In the context of the census, concerns about breaches of confidentiality have been remarkably successful. The organised opposition to the ethnic question in the 1981 census in Britain, which took the form of refusals to cooperate with the test census in Haringey in April 1980, resulted in its being omitted from the census schedule so as not to sabotage the entire operation. And in Holland, the census has been postponed indefinitely because of the confidentiality issue. It remains to be seen what will happen both in West Germany later this month and in

Britain, should the 1986 census take place. Whether or not the West German campaign is successful in stopping the census, it seems likely that it will now be successful in sabotaging the operation through non-cooperation. One thing is clear: it can no longer be taken for granted that the census will remain a major source of demographic and social data.

#### Notes

1. In fact, the system of police registration dates back to 18th century Prussia. Its chief purpose is the control of the population. The system was further developed by the Nazis and maintained after 1945.
2. This was planned to take place in certain areas only, e.g. Munich.

#### Postscript

The census has been postponed through a decision of the Federal Constitutional Court. The decision did not imply that the census was unconstitutional, but that there was enough doubt about its legality to make a proper legal investigation necessary. The decision is widely regarded as the result of political pressure through the widespread campaign. The census was stopped because refusals would have been so widespread as to make it useless. If there is another census, it will not now take place for a year or so, and safeguards against the misuse of data will have to be built in.