

A Radical Democrat and Great Demographer: for the 125th Birthday of René Kuczynski¹

Thomas Kuczynski

The people's referendum on the expropriation of the nobility without compensation had its 75th anniversary 6 weeks ago. The body which demanded such a referendum entered the realm of history as the 'Kuczynski Commission' (Kuczynski-Ausschuss).

Who was Kuczynski? The anniversary of this campaign is an appropriate moment to recall this rather unique personality in the context of 20th century German history. Robert René Abraham Kuczynski was born on 12 August 1876 in Berlin. His father Wilhelm was a banker and his mother Lucy, the daughter of Samuel Brandeis. The latter was expelled from Prussia in 1846, when he was still a student – accused of engaging in activities aimed at overthrowing the existing order. He spent the rest of his life in Paris.

Kuczynski studied economics and law in Freiburg, Strasburg and Munich. Among his teachers were Lujo Brentano, Georg Friedrich Knapp and Paul Hensel. After his one year's military service, he worked

¹ This biographical sketch was published in German in 2001, 75 years after the Kuczynski Commission of 1926: 'Ein radikaler Demokrat und großer Demograph, Zum 125. Geburtstag von René Kuczynski' *Junge Welt*, 186, 11./12. August 2001, pp10/11 . Translation by Jörn Janssen, 2015. Note from editors: Radical Statistics includes this short biography of a radical statistician of the early twentieth century who spent his last years exiled in London. He is relatively unrecognised in English language sources, but sources in German include: Jürgen Kuczynski (1957) René Kuczynski, Ein fortschrittlicher Wissenschaftler in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts, Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, and Hans H Lembke (2008) Die Schwarzen Schafe bei den Gradenwitz und Kuczynski. Zwei Berliner Familien im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert, Berlin: Trafo.

as a volunteer under Richard Böckh, the Director of the City of Berlin's Statistical Office. This was followed by a four-year apprenticeship under Carroll D. Wright, Director of the Bureau for Labour Statistics in Washington. On his return from the USA in 1904, he became director of the Statistical Office in Elberfeld and in 1906 he took the same post in Berlin-Schöneberg.

On 1 December 1903, he had married Berta Gradenwitz with whom he also made a contribution to demography – one son and five daughters, including the now legendary Sonya (Ruth Werner)².

In his dissertation and under Böckh, Kuczynski worked on problems of demography and population statistics. In the USA, he was engaged above all in the problem of labour statistics, on which he published a large monographic work, entitled "Arbeitslohn und Arbeitszeit in Europa und Amerika, 1870-1909" (The wages of labour and working hours in Europe and America, 1870-1909). Lenin called this book a manual on wages.

Statistics relating to wages and shortage of housing

From then he became an urban statistician investigating above all the housing conditions of the working population. He discovered a fitting addendum to Schwabe's law that "the lower the income, the higher the proportion that has to go on rent". Kuczynski added "the smaller the accommodation, the higher the share spent on rent". He found that "in Greater Berlin, 600,000 people live in flats which house five or more people per room". This became the slogan of a huge movement against these dreadful living conditions. It was a movement in which he worked with bourgeois politicians such as Friedrich Naumann and the former Secretary of State Dernburg, Social Democrats such as Karl Liebknecht and Albert Sudekum, as well as artists such as Käthe Kollwitz and Max Liebermann. The slogan was a matter-of-fact scientific statement that did not at first cause much of a stir. But when accompanied by a drawing by Kollwitz it was plastered all over Berlin, it led to his first major political clash. For now, according to Kuczynski on this subject at a mass meeting, "the Mayor Kirchner got up and said 'One does not do this sort of thing; it blackens Berlin's image abroad'".

With the outbreak of the First World War, Kuczynski turned to questions of people's nutrition. Engaged in this particular field, it was

² Ruth Werner's *Sonya's Report* was published by Chatto and Windus in 1991.

“doubly self-evident” to him that he would rather let his own family go hungry than supplement their rations by buying on the black market or accepting “charitable gifts” from colleagues. Kuczynski could not be bought with money, offices or honours. His demand that pigs that were ready for slaughter should be introduced into the food chain – in order to at least safeguard the supply of potatoes for the population – earned him the title of “Jewish pig murderer” from Junkers and Nazis alike.

After the war, he worked in an honorary capacity in the Reich’s Office for the Economy, assisting with the preparation for peace negotiations. This work was terminated after a few weeks with a row: RRK had estimated the damage to the German economy resulting from the allied blockade policy at 4 billion marks; obviously dissatisfied with such a moderate result the Reich’s Office ordered a new calculation which was made by a statistical assistant within 24 hours who, in line with the orders he had been received, came, taking into account just the damage through the loss of foreign imports of cattle feed, to the ridiculous sum of 35 billion marks.

A similar lack of success befell his efforts in the second Socialisation Commission since from the start that body was limited to mini-reforms and compromises. Kuczynski commented: “If one eventually reaches a compromise in the implementation, that is quite different from being presented with far-reaching compromises at the very beginning of the discussion, such as Herr Rathenau has indicated to us. If from the very beginning a compromise is built into a plan then this is such a wobbly venture that nothing much can be achieved”. No wonder that Walther Rathenau, who later became Foreign Minister, was foaming at the mouth when he asserted at the time that Kuczynski always forms a one-man party and then takes a position on its left wing.

The last joint action of the KPD and SPD

In fact, Kuczynski never joined any party, but during the Weimar Republic always voted KPD³, remarking that it was the least unbearable of all the parties. This independent position possibly enabled him to persuade the two great workers parties, SPD⁴ and KPD, to participate in its last joint activity as part of the so-called ‘Kuczynski Commission’ to carry out the people’s referendum for the expropriation without compensation of the nobility. The initiator of this referendum was the

³ KPD : The Communist Party of Germany.

⁴ SPD The Social Democratic Party of Germany, roughly equivalent to the Labour Party of Britain.

German League for Human Rights in which Kuczynski played a leading role, along with Helene Stöcker working for women's rights and the pacifist Ludwig Quidde. The petition for the referendum was then made to the Reich's Minister of the Interior jointly by Ernst Thälmann⁵, Otto Wels⁶ and - René Kuczynski.

In 1927, in relation to the battle supported by the League for Human Rights to save Sacco and Vanzetti⁷, Kuczynski was denounced by the Reich's Commissioner for Public Order, as the pacemaker for the development of the Proletarian Unity Movement ("Proletarische Einheitsfront").

Kuczynski's efforts at reconciliation between the peoples of France and Germany led him in January 1923 to found the "Deutsch-Französische Wirtschaftskorrespondenz" (German-French Economic Bulletin) where in its foreword he remarked dryly that "I am conscious of the fact that I do not respond in this to a widely felt need or desire". But also his contribution to the Reich's Congress of International Workers Aid in 1924 will have presented the ruling class with little joy.

In 1919, as a statistician, Kuczynski founded his own journal, the "Finanzpolitische Korrespondenz" (Finance Political Bulletin). Calculations of a subsistence minimum and wages for the workers of Berlin were published in it. These were an invaluable aid in the fight against the impact of inflation and reduced wages. In publications of the German and the international labour movement, he was now known as "the renowned statistician Kuczynski".

So the renowned statistician Kuczynski came to lead the German delegation to the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution in Moscow, together with Käthe Kollwitz, Johannes R. Becher, Eduard Fuchs, Arthur Holitscher and Erwin Piscator, among others. In a letter to his son, he advised him to learn Russian and spend some unlimited time in Russia, because "Soviet Russia is the future". And he went on, "The discussions (with the director of the research commission and the Statistical Department of the Central Council of Trade Unions) lasted two hours. The idea was that I should advise on raising living standards and wages. When I left, I had the impression that I had been of little help to these people. They were so knowledgeable and extraordinarily

⁵ The chair of the KPD and Member of Parliament 1924-1933.

⁶ The chair of the Social Democratic Party and a member of Parliament 1920-1933.

⁷ Two Italian anarchists in the USA, falsely accused of murder and executed in the United States.

skilled in the argumentation that as a German specialist who knows America, one could hardly offer anything of value, and the ever present desire one has here is to learn, not to lecture!"

Bankers' profits and public loss

As a finance statistician, Kuczynski concerned himself above all with questions relating to reparations and American loans to Germany - that is to say, once again on the "wrong side", as a freelance co-worker at the Brookings Institute in Washington. At that time, this was still a pretty liberal institution. His last book on this subject, "Wall Street und die deutschen Anleihen. Bankierprofite und Publikumsverluste" (Wall Street and loans to Germany: Bankers' Profits and Public Losses), was completed in the summer of 1932 and appeared in Leipzig in January 1933 - it was "of course" banned and burnt.

Kuczynski's most significant scientific contribution, however, was no doubt in the foundations he laid for modern population statistics. The methodology and terminology embodied in the works he published in that field from 1928 onwards are employed right through to the present day.

In Germany, it was all the easier to ignore them since all of them were published in the USA and Britain. In the 30s and 40s, his calculations of the gross and net reproduction rates of the population of Western Europe and the USA were simply called the "Kuczynski rates". And his books were reprinted even in the 1980s. Yet his name and work are practically unknown in Federal German literature, while in the GDR at least his methodological research on fertility and reproduction ("Fruchtbarkeit und Reproduktion") was reprinted.

In spring 1933 Kuczynski had to flee from Germany. From the autumn he lectured in demography at the London School of Economics. Later, in retirement, he became demographic adviser to the Colonial Office.

Of particular political significance at this point in his life were the publication of his investigation on "Living space and population problems" in 1939 and then his activity as President of the Free German Movement in Great Britain.

His three-volume magnum opus, "Demographic survey of the British Colonial Empire", appeared from 1948 to 1953. He had been able to correct the proofs of the first volume. After the completion of this magnum opus, he had wanted to take up the offer of a Chair in Demography at the University of Berlin, but this did not come to be. He

died in London on 27 November 1947, five months after the death of his wife.

Kuczynski expressed his opinion of himself in the following way: “I hope I am a first-rate second-class scientist”. He knew, of course, he was not a genius, although the foundations he laid for modern population statistics may have entered the realm of this status. An American colleague put it this way: “One is bowled over by the simplicity of your methodology and at the same time by the significance of the results to which it leads”. What raised him way above the great mass of second class scientists in Germany was his ability of making known the results of his unbiased scientific analysis also – and indeed especially so – when they did not fit into the “political landscape” of the day.

Orphaned charitable prize

In 1976, for his hundredth birthday, his son Jürgen and daughter-in-law Marguerite had the idea of founding a René Kuczynski prize, for the scientifically most outstanding contribution published in the “Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte” (Yearbook of Economic History), which was, at that time, published by the Institute of Economic History of the Academy of Sciences of the GDR. Since the Institute was closed down and the new body was not interested in taking over the prize, the fund was returned to the donors. Five years later, it was handed over to the “Stiftung für Sozialgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts” (Foundation for Social History of the 20th Century) as trustee, at that time still located in Hamburg. But, as that body did not manage to command the respect that it should have received from the scientific community, it did not manage to establish itself. Consequently the prize entrusted to the foundation was not established at a university of this country. So the prize is once again in the hands of a solicitor. Probably, the prize itself does not fit well into the landscape of German scientific life. Yet, its renewed use in the terms laid down by the donors, as well as by he who gave his name to it, could change the minds of those who regard so pessimistically the reputation of Germany for science and its future⁸.

⁸ The René Kuczynski award has been awarded since 2003 by the International Conference of Labour and Social History (ITH) in Vienna.