Funded by the European Union

Università degli Studi di Padova

Call for papers

Demographic change and social policy-making in Postwar Europe

University of Padova, Italy, 12-14 May 2027



Postwar Europe underwent significant demographic transformations: first the so-called baby boom, and then population ageing driven by falling fertility and declining mortality among the elderly. These transformations have deeply shaped public policy and, since the mid-1970s, have been increasingly invoked to justify cutting benefits, altering financing mechanisms and questioning the welfare state itself. This workshop investigates this link from a broader historical perspective, by asking **what role did demographic change – and the expertise built around it – play in the design, justification and contestation of social policy reforms in Europe after 1945.** We invite papers that analyse, through a focus on actors (demographers, statisticians, bureaucrats, party and interest-group officials), how demographic knowledge and demographic arguments were mobilised in social policy-making, understood in the broadest possible sense (social security, healthcare, education, housing, fiscal and territorial cohesion policies), **from 1945 to the present, in both Western and Eastern Europe.**



How to apply

To submit a proposal, please send an abstract of the proposed paper (between 250 and 500 words) and a short CV **by 22 December** via this form (for any questions: giacomo.canepa[at]unipd.it):

https://framaforms.org/cfp-demographic-change-and-social-policy-making-in-postwar-europe-1793906951

Contributions that include a comparative analysis or a transnational perspective are particularly welcomed and projects still at an early stage of advancement are accepted.

Conference funds are available to cover accommodation and travel expenses. When applying, please indicate where you will travel from and how. In order to make the conference as sustainable as possible, we encourage you to consider travelling by train whenever possible: train tickets will be reimbursed in all cases, whereas flights for journeys that can be made by train in under 7 hours will not.

Scientific Committee: Giacomo Canepa (Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellow, Universities of Padova and Basel), Martin Lengwiler (University of Basel) and Lorenzo Mechi (University of Padova).

The workshop will take place over two day and will be hosted by the University of Padova. Selected participants will be notified by 15 January 2027 and will be asked to send a short paper *or* a summary of the main arguments by 30 April to give session chairs and participants enough time to prepare for the discussions. Each presentation will last 15-20 minutes and the working language will be English.

Funded by the European Union

The workshop is organised within the framework of the project **Marie Skłodowska-Curie**, grant agreement n. 101152780 – SPADE — HORIZON-MSCA-2023-PF-01. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3030/101152780. The project complies to the guidelines of the **MSCA Green Charter**.

Argument

Post-war Europe underwent significant demographic changes: a sharp rise in marriage rates and fertility (the so-called ‘baby boom’), followed, from the 1970s onwards, by a decline of family size, a shift in gender norms and a process of population ageing, caused by falling fertility rates and declining mortality among the elderly. These transformations resulted in expert knowledge that addressed demographic issues regarded both as specific to Europe and as precursors of future global trends. The change in the composition of age cohorts, coupled with the recognition of socio-economic rights, had a significant impact on the design of public policies. Rising life expectancy, increasing healthcare expenditure, the retirement of larger cohorts of the population, and the end of the baby-boom era have raised questions about social spending, its internal composition, its alignment with intended purposes, and its financing arrangements (Eräranta, 2015; Geyer, 2015; Rosina and Impicciatore, 2022). The impact of demographic change on social policy became a key issue in current public debate and the elderly have increasingly been considered as a burden. Demographic statistics are often presented as a destiny, providing a rhetoric that objectifies and legitimises social policy reforms by portraying them as necessary or inevitable (Hartmann and Vogel, 2010; Messerschmidt, 2017). This workshop investigates the interplay between demographic changes and social policy reforms across Europe since 1945.

Historiography has shown how demography accompanied the emergence and the development of social policies by shaping the thinking, the policy instruments and the decisions of public policy makers: Michel Foucault described it as a veritable ‘science of government’. Following World War II, social policies continued to pursue demographic objectives and played a key role in significant demographic changes – for example by increasing life expectancy, by providing educational opportunities to larger populations, by supporting the unexpected rise in birth rates through family policies, and by tackling the imbalances caused by the declining importance of agriculture and by accelerated internal migrations (Rosental, 2007; Reinecke, 2021; Cardon-Quint, 2025; De Graaf, 2026).

Starting from the late 1960s, however, lengthening lifespans and changing birth rates raised concerns about the rising costs of old-age pension schemes and the sustainability of the welfare state, while they also led to a welcomed decrease in spending on education and family policies. From the 1970s onwards, demography was invoked not only to justify public policies and state intervention, but also – and above all – as a constraint that had to be managed by reducing social benefits or modifying their financing mechanisms. The discourses on demographic changes became thus intertwined with the so-called ‘crisis of the welfare state’ and the rise of neoliberal thought: the practical adjustments in response to the contradictions within existing systems have been at least as significant as the dissemination of major economic theories and ideas in what Stephanie Mudge has described as the ‘economisation of politics’ (Mudge, 2018). Demographic change came to be presented, from the mid-1970s onwards, as one of the most acute contradictions in social policies, both as an argument for reforming them and for calling them into question (Le Lann, 2010; Leimgruber, 2013; Sklansky, 2023). In the historiography of this period, the role played by demography as a discipline and by demographic transformations – both as drivers of emerging needs and as rhetorical arguments for reform – in the design of social policies has yet to be analysed. The solutions proposed to address the implications of demographic change entailed political choices which differed from one country to another, while being debated in transnational political and scientific communities. The institutionalist approach of political scientists has emphasised the logic of path dependency and the influence of social groups on the electoral process. However, it has shown little interest in the history of decision-making processes. By contrast, this workshop explores the importance – or lack thereof – of demographic expertise in the intellectual, scientific and bureaucratic

practices necessary for the design and implementation of social policy reforms through **the perspective of the historical actors**: experts such as demographers, statisticians, and economists, as well as business lobby groups and trade unions, policy-makers and political party members.

This workshop aims to connect the history of demographic change, the history of demography – as both a discipline and a subject of public debate – and the history of social policy-making **in both Western and Eastern European countries**. The contributions will examine **how demography and demographic changes have been mobilised in the design of social policy reforms** – in the broadest sense of the term (including, in a non-exhaustive list, social security, healthcare, housing, education, fiscal policies, and territorial cohesion) – **from 1945 to the present day.**

Conceived as a first step in the preparation of a collective volume or a special issue, this workshop proposes a historical reflection on the key players who have raised the issues of the implications of demographic change for public policy, as well as the socio-economic debates that these issues have sparked, and the importance and the limits of demographic concerns in shaping the policy-making decisions. By discussing **historically-grounded case studies**, potentially in comparative perspective, participants could consider one or more of the following questions:

1. **Demographers as actors.** The first working axis will analyse the profile and the role of the experts and how they have changed over time (Lengwiler, 2012; Trentmann, 2018): did population scientists – who had shaped a eugenic framework regarding issues of population quantity and quality in several European countries – continue to play a role in the formulation of public policy after the 1950s? How were they designated as experts or selected amongst their peers by the public administration looking for scientific legitimacy? Did their profiles diverge in terms of ideological or religious affiliations, gender or professional activity? How did their relations to other fields of expertise (such as statistics, sociology and economics) involved in the preparation of social policy reforms change ? In which scientific and funding contexts did their research take place? How did they come to be involved in assessing the new needs arising from demographic changes. And, conversely, how did they raise such issues to decision-makers? Did political parties, trade unions and employers organisations develop form of activism that used demographic data and theories to support their agendas?

2. **Demography as knowledge.** Lutz Raphael's concept of 'scientisation' (Raphael, 2012) highlights the practical, socially embedded forms of knowledge production. Following the insights of the history of knowledge, according to which the production, circulation and representation of any form of knowledge should be regarded as part of a broader social process (Östling et al., 2018), this axis focuses on the methodological choices that influenced the organisation of data and projections, their specific enunciation devices, and their assumptions. Demographic data, like statistical data, are social products framing a legitimate representation of the social world (Tooze, 2001; Doboș, 2020): the very concept of 'ageing', at the heart of the debate, depends not only on the birth rate but also on the number of new entrants replacing older people in the labour market (Bourdelais, 1993). Which indicators did they rely on and how did they change over time (dependency ratio, completed fertility rate, generational accounts, age at first birth, life-course analysis etc.)? How was the uncertainty of demographic forecasting presented? How did the data account for the effects of immigration, as well as economic development and its impact on productivity growth and employment rates by gender? To what extent were public policy issues framed as determined by demographic (rather than economic or budgetary) variables?

3. **Demographic theories in the policy-making debate.** Historians have shown that demographic concerns only gained prominence when they were raised by specific political actors (Lengwiler, 2007; Cahen, 2022). This axis focuses on the interactions between demographic theories, policy-making and political debate. For example, what role did theories such as the 'second demographic transition' play in shaping new approaches to social policy priorities, thereby redefining the relationship between individuals, the family and the state and the respective roles of public and private in welfare? What debates, options and conflicts regarding social policy have been sparked by demographic concerns – not only over how social spending was allocated and funded, but also over gender and generational balance? To what extent were different social policy programmes considered able to influence demographic variables or to mitigate the impact of the consequences of demographic change? How did demographic concerns and projections fuel criticism of past and current policies? How did different intellectual and political traditions – such as conservatism, social Catholicism, social democracy, communism, feminism and the New Left – interact with the emergence of new policy paradigms based on the new catchword of 'generational sustainability'?

4. **Transnational circulations.** The last focus of the workshop concerns international and European scientific and political networks, the role of international organisations in disseminating key concepts in social policy reform, as well as the ways in which these concepts were imported, adapted, selectively adopted or met with resistance in each country. In what supranational and transnational contexts was demographic knowledge – and its impact on public policy – debated, developed and disseminated? Around what points did convergence and conflict between the various national traditions and strategies centre? Did supranational and international organizations serve as standard-setters and carriers of expertise? The debates on the impact of demographic ageing and its possible solutions unfolded in different European fora, given the central role of welfare in the competitiveness of Member States within the Single Market (Mechi, 2017; Warlouzet, 2024): how did they interact with the transnational discussion on social rights? Finally, demographic challenges also affected Eastern European countries: to what extent did demography contribute to the circulation of models, ideas and expertise in the field of planning during the Cold War? (Iacob et al., 2018; Kott et al., 2025; Obinger, 2025).

Selected bibliography

Bourdelais, Patrice. *Le nouvel âge de la vieillesse: histoire du vieillissement de la population*. Odile Jacob, 1993.

Cahen, Fabrice. *Le Nombre Des Hommes. La Mesure de La Population et Ses Enjeux (XVIe-XXIe Siècle)*. Garnier, 2022.

Cardon-Quint, Clémence. *L'argent de l'école: Histoire du budget de l'Éducation nationale depuis 1945*. Presses de Sciences Po, 2025.

De Graaf, Jan. "The 'Golden Age of Social Mobility' in Postwar Europe: Class Relations, Educational Expansion, and Political Stability in East and West." *Journal of Social History* 59, no. 3 (2026): 565–84.

Doboș, Corina. "Disciplining Births: Population Research and Politics in Communist Romania." *The History of the Family* 25, no. 4 (2020): 599–626.

Eräranta, Kirsi. "A New Social Risk? Social-Scientific Knowledge and Work-Life Balance in Twentieth-Century Finland." *Social Science History* 39, no. 1 (2015): 63–83.

Geyer, Martin H. "'Gaps' and the (Re-)Invention of the Future Social and Demographic Policy in Germany during the 1970s and 1980s." *Social Science History* 39, no. 1 (2015): 39–61.

Hartmann, Heinrich, and Jakob Vogel, eds. *Zukunftswissen: Prognosen in Wirtschaft, Politik und Gesellschaft seit 1900*. Campus, 2010.

Iacob, Bogdan C., Corina Doboș, Raluca Grosescu, Viviana Iacob, and Vlad Pașca. "State Socialist Experts in Transnational Perspective. East European Circulation of Knowledge during the Cold War (1950s–1980s)" *East Central Europe* 45, nos. 2–3 (2018): 145–59.

Kott, Sandrine, Eva-Maria Muschik, and Elisabeth Roehrlich, eds. *International Organizations and the Cold War: Competition, Cooperation, and Convergence*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2025.

Le Lann, Yann. “La retraite, un patrimoine ?” *Genèses* 118, no. 1 (2020): 44–62.

Leimgruber, Matthieu. “La sécurité sociale au péril du vieillissement. Les organisations internationales et l’alarmisme démographique (1975-1995).” *Le Mouvement Social* n° 244, no. 3 (2013): 31–45.

Lengwiler, Martin. “Politics Through the Back Door: Expert Knowledge in International Welfare Organizations.” In *Engineering Society: The Role of the Human and Social Sciences in Modern Societies, 1880-1980,* edited by Kerstin Brückweh, Dirk Schumann, Richard F. Wetzell, and Benjamin Ziemann. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012.

Lengwiler, Martin. “Vom Übervölkerungs- Zum Überalterungsparadigma : Das Verhältnis Zwischen Demographie Und Bevölkerungspolitik in Historischer Perspektive.” In *Demographisierung Des Gesellschaftlichen: Analysen Und Debatten Zur Demographischen Zukunft Deutschlands*, edited by Eva Barlösius and Daniela Schiek. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007.

Mechi, Lorenzo. “Consultation technique et légitimation politique : la participation des experts aux premiers pas de la politique sociale européenne (1958-1975).” *Revue d’histoire de la protection sociale* 10, no. 1 (2017): 102–23.

Messerschmidt, Reinhard. “Demographic Change as Dystopia: Contemporary German Discourses on Ageing, between Science and Politics.” In *Framing Age: Contested Knowledge in Science and Politics*, edited by Iris Loffeier, Benoît Majerus, and Thibauld Moulaert. Routledge, 2017.

Mudge, Stephanie L. *Leftism Reinvented: Western Parties from Socialism to Neoliberalism*. Harvard University Press, 2018.

Obinger, Herbert. “The Impact of System Competition on Social Policy: The Cold War and Beyond.” In *The Generosity of Social Policies in Socialist and Post-Socialist States*, edited by Andreas Heinrich, Monika Ewa Kaminska, Heiko Pleines, and Tobias ten Brink. Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025.

Östling, Johan, Erling Sandmo, David Larsson Heidenblad, Anna Nilsson Hammar, and Kari Nordberg. *Circulation of Knowledge : Explorations in the History of Knowledge*. Nordic Academic Press, 2018.

Raphael, Lutz. “Embedding the Human and Social Sciences in Western Societies, 1880–1980: Reflections on Trends and Methods of Current Research.” In *Engineering Society,* cit..

Reinecke, Christiane. *Die Ungleichheit der Städte: Urbane Problemzonen im postkolonialen Frankreich und der Bundesrepublik*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021.

Rosental, Paul-André. “L’argument démographique. Population et histoire politique au 20e siècle.” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire* 95, no. 3 (2007): 3–14.

Rosina, Alessandro, and Roberto Impicciatore. *Storia demografica d’Italia. Crescita, crisi e sfide*. Carocci, 2022.

Sklansky, Jeffrey. “The Work of Retirement.” *International Review of Social History* 68, no. 2 (2023): 301–23.

Tooze, Adam. *Statistics and the German State, 1900-1945 : The Making of Modern Economic Knowledge*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Trentmann, Frank, Anna Barbara Sum, and Manuel Rivera, eds. *Work in Progress: Economy and Environment in the Hands of Experts*. Oekom Verlag, 2018.

Warlouzet, Laurent. “A Flanking European Welfare State: The European Community’s Social Dimension, from Brandt to Delors (1969–1993).” *Contemporary European History* 33, no. 1 (2024): 23–36.