

### **23. INVITATION TO HARVARD: GEORGE HOMANS AND ROGER REVELLE, CAMBRIDGE, 1972-83**

That fall (1972) we moved to Harvard, where we were welcomed by Roger Revelle, who had come from California to found the Harvard Center for Population Studies in the fall of 1964. And by Derek Bok, who had just been appointed President of Harvard and who was on crutches, result of an accident on the basketball floor. He recovered, and even among Harvard Presidents he was outstanding--for intellectual leadership and as an administrator. During his years of tenure Harvard made important advances.

The formal invitation to Harvard came from George Homans, Chair of the Department of Sociology. Here are a few words about where he stood in our discipline.

George Homans, great practitioner of sociology, Cambridge, 1972

It helps me in giving an idea of Homans that he was interviewed by Bill Bainbridge for Sociology Lives.

Homans made much of field work, of the kind that he and the Westinghouse researchers did with industrial groups. "Studying a small group over six months or more," he said, "provides illumination as to actual human behavior" that is among other things often "absolutely crucial in understanding the statistical results."

I can confirm that, having been lucky enough to spend some months living in a peasant cottage in East Java. I saw from the inside a mode of living totally different from the staid lace curtain style of a North American suburb, all in one of the most crowded rural areas in the world. I ate what my hosts ate, watched them at work, talked to them day after day, and empathized with their problems.

How did the population get to the point where the pressure on the land is intense, and where the standard of living is rock bottom low? Bare statistics don't answer that. Those peasants have traditionally liked kids more than they liked private property in land or other wealth. We have few children and concentrate on the increase of wealth, so revealing a scale of values that is the reverse of the Javanese. If a Javanese couple had many children they would be assigned extra land; a couple with few or no children, not needing much land, would be assigned less on the next of the traditional periodic redivisions of the irrigated rice terraces. Such redivision had in practice lapsed by the time I did my field work, but it was very much a living ideal often mentioned when children were discussed. People might say that so and so has many children; he should have more land. We would say so and so shouldn't have had so many children--he can't support them.

I could see a simple feedback in what I was told: more children entitles [one] to more land, and more land enables more children to survive, so density and poverty spiral, all accommodated in Clifford Geertz's culture of poverty.

Field work enabled me to realize deep down that people of other cultures think differently from myself, and their way of thinking comes as naturally to them as mine does to me. People everywhere undergo many of the same vicissitudes, like having children, but when these are interpreted differently they become different experiences. It takes observation on the ground, not often enough done by demographers, to reveal the varieties of meaning births and other demographic events present. For a pious Muslim couple a first birth is needed to validate a marriage, so that a wife who cannot produce even one child is likely to find herself divorced and on the street, virtually an outcast from society. For an ambitious American couple an unexpected birth is often interpreted as an obstacle to the couple's advance. (Evidence: one and a half million pregnancies are aborted each year in the United States.)

Such differences reach into all countries and every aspect of life. The Japanese, whose historic experience of real hunger is still remembered, willingly pays four times the world market price for home-grown rice, simply for the security of having it whatever happens abroad; the American, who has no historic experience of hunger, cannot understand this and thinks the Japanese should forget those fears and buy in the cheapest market.

Not relevant to his work in the academy, and never referred to by George himself, with two U.S. presidents in his ancestry, if there is such a thing as an American aristocrat it was he.

### **Roger Revelle, Cambridge 1972**

Roger was a big man in every way: tall, big feet, large, quick mind, and great sense of humor. One could not help admiring him, though at times he could be exasperating--always by intention. He really belonged on the West Coast, and had risen very high in the hierarchy of the University of California, but was disappointed when passed over for the Presidency of the University. In the academy he had been oceanographer and geophysicist, but that led him to ecology and the sustainability of our way of life. That led him to the world population problem, and left him open to an invitation to be the founding head of the Harvard Center for Population Studies.

Once described by the New York Times as "one of the world's most articulate spokesmen for science" and "an early predictor of global warming," Roger Revelle was a giant in American science who accomplished enough during his eighty-two years to distinguish several lifetimes.

"Revelle first made his mark in oceanography--as a scientist, explorer, and administrator--and went on to become a senior spokesman for science, giving counsel in areas ranging from the

environment and education to agriculture and world population. He was one of the first scientists to recognize the effects of rising levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide on the Earth's surface temperature.

"Born in Seattle, Washington, on March 7, 1909, Revelle was raised in Pasadena, California, and was identified as a gifted student early in his academic career. In 1925, Revelle entered Pomona College with an interest in journalism, but later turned to geology as his major field of study. In 1928, Revelle met Ellen Virginia Clark, a student at the neighboring Scripps College and a grandniece of Scripps College founder Ellen Browning Scripps. They were married in 1931."

In short, it was as though George (on behalf of the Department) owned the coveted post; Roger, as head of the Harvard Center for Population Studies, controlled the funds that would pay my salary.