

# **DEMOGRAPHIC DESTINIES**

**Interviews with Past Presidents of the Population Association of America  
A Project of the PAA History Committee**

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**Interview with Alberto Palloni  
PAA President in 2006**

**Interviewed by Dennis Hodgson, Karen Hardee and Emily Merchant  
at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel, Washington, D.C., Thursday, March 31, 2016**



Dr. Alberto Palloni is currently the Samuel H. Preston Professor of Sociology, Emeritus, at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He received his Bachelor's degree in Sociology from Catholic University of Chile in 1971, and his Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Washington in 1977. Prior to moving to the University of Wisconsin in 1980, he was at the University of Texas, Austin from 1977-1979, the United Nations Population Division in New York City in 1979, and the University of Michigan from 1979-1980.

**HODGSON:** We're at the 2016 PAA meetings in Washington, D.C. and we're about to begin an interview with Alberto Palloni, who's the 2006 president of the Population Association of America. You can introduce yourself and tell us your current position.

**PALLONI:** I'm retired. I'm emeritus at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. I am planning to start a new career and I'm continuing to do demographic work on a limited basis and eventually probably will cease altogether.

**HODGSON:** That sounds good. And I'm Dennis Hodgson. I will be participating in this interview with Karen Hardee and Emily Merchant. This is a tradition in the PAA, to interview every past PPA president. It goes all the way back to the 1940s. So again, what we would like to do is start out with like an intellectual biography about how you got into demography. I would love to have you begin the story in terms of where you grew up and maybe your undergraduate years, and we'll move on from there.

**PALLONI:** Okay. I grew up in a small city in Chile, called Viña del Mar. I was part of a very close-knit group of Italian migrants who arrived recently after World War II. At home we spoke a dialect, Piedmontese, which is a dialect from the north, rarely Italian, because my parents and my relatives were not very well-educated and spoke different dialects. In Italy at that time, Italian, I believe, belonged to the more educated people. I went to a French school, Sacré Coeur, which is a congregation of priests that originated in France. There I had to speak French and in general I had to speak Spanish because I was in Chile. So I quickly picked up three languages, actually four, if you count the dialect which I was never able to speak, but I understood it perfectly. It is one of those strange things. Why can I not speak this dialect, so close to French.

So anyway, I graduated in 1966 from high school. I was 16 years old, just way too young to know what to do with myself. And I ended up going to sociology for reasons that I still don't

understand at all. I think it was a friend of mine who, weeks before I had to make a decision, told me, look, sociology is great; it's the new science! I said, what is sociology? So he told me a little bit. And I said, that sounds great. I wanted to get out of Viña del Mar and I wanted to go to Santiago, the capital. I wanted to be away from my family. I think that that was what forced me to go, but I could have been, I don't know, an astronomer, I could have been a chemical engineer, I could have even been a philosopher, because I was accepted in all those schools.

So I went to the Catholic University in Santiago, to the department of sociology, where I had my first encounter with demography, which was an unfortunate encounter. It was taught by a former graduate from the University of Louvain in Belgium. He had been at INED [in Paris] and had been a student I think of one of the very famous demographers like Louis Henry or Jean Bourgeois-Pichat or Roland Pressat. But he was an awful teacher and I had no interest in demography at all. I hated it with passion and I flunked the course. [laughter] It's the only course I ever failed in my life and I still look back and I say, my God, how can I be here?

So to make the story short, I flunked another exam. It was a formal exam which was the English test they gave me before I came to the U.S. The American Embassy used to interview applicants and you had to be able to speak English and the guy who interviewed me in the embassy quickly realized after 30 seconds that I had no idea—I knew how to read English, I could understand some, but I was totally nil when it came to communicating. So he told me, you have to go to learn English.

And of all places I ended up at the University of Texas at Austin to learn English. This was in June of 1973. The coup, the military coup, occurred on September 11. If I had not flunked the exam in English I wouldn't be here. I'm almost sure of it. So that was a second kind of random thing that happened.

Then the reason why I wanted to come to the U.S. was to study mathematical sociology, formal sociology. I had followed Hubert (Tad) Blalock's career, you may remember.

**HODGSON:** Blalock was at Washington at that time.

**PALLONI:** No, here comes the thing. He was in North Carolina. The year that I was supposed to come here, Tad was in UNC and had just resigned and moved to Washington. I had been accepted to North Carolina, not to Washington.

**HODGSON:** And you did it because you wanted to follow him.

**PALLONI:** I wanted to follow him. It was by chance, because he wrote me about six months before he quit in North Carolina. He said, look, I'm sorry. I've been following your trajectory, but I'm leaving. I'm going to the University of Washington.

I said, can I get admitted to Washington? He said, I don't know, but just apply. So it was a special application and I was accepted. Instead of flying from Santiago to North Carolina, Chapel Hill, I ended up in Seattle, a place that I had no idea where it was. It was so far up north I said, my God, where is this?

Here comes the third random event. A year before I moved to Washington, Sam Preston moved from Berkeley to Washington. And Tad Blalock told me, you have to take Sam Preston's course in demography. And I said, I'm not going to do this.

**HODGSON:** Because you had your demography experience.

**PALLONI:** I already had had it. I said, forget it, no. He finally convinced me. And actually, talking to Sam and knowing that he was such a nice person, I took it and I fell in love with it.

**HODGSON:** There you are.

**PALLONI:** So I'm here in part because of a series of truly random events. And—

**HODGSON:** I've got one quick question.

**PALLONI:** Sure.

**HODGSON:** To go back just a little bit, because I'm thinking, here you are in Chile, in Santiago, 1970, you're graduating, and it was such a wild time.

**PALLONI:** It was incredible. I even—

**HODGSON:** How about the politics of Chile and Santiago? We know you didn't like demography. We know you were a sociology major—

**PALLONI:** I was very left leaning. I was in the sociology department, where the most important things that were being taught were the French Marxist School and classic Marxism. You know, we read *Capital*. I learned a great deal from the French school. But anyway, it was a time to be on the left, a time to support a lot of political activities.

I always was withdrawn from that. I didn't want to go to demonstrations and I didn't like to participate in political meetings. I wanted to study. I wanted to do my things. And so I was considered kind of a marginal member of the group. But I do remember the time that I was studying, I remember shootings in the street, and it used to—

**HODGSON:** There was a lot going on, [Fernando Henrique] Cardoso was there—

**MERCHANT:** All of the people from the development and dependency were all there.

**HODGSON:** And *Dependency and Development [in Latin America]* came out in 1970 [published originally in Spanish, 1969; Portuguese, 1970; English, 1979—ed].

**PALLONI:** Exactly. And those people were an important engine behind [Salvador] Allende, because the people who supported Allende were not just Marxists, they were people from the Christian Democratic left who were involved with the Cardoso/[Enzo] Faletto work. There were others—

**HODGSON:** Faletto was at the University of Chile.

**PALLONI:** That's right. Faletto was in Chile.

**HODGSON:** Not Catholic University, University of Chile.

**PALLONI:** He was at the University of Chile. Cardoso briefly passed through. I think he slipped by in one of the other institutes. He wasn't in the university, I remember. At that time they founded a center called CEREN [Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Nacional], which was a center where there was a lot of intellectual activity, in which I took part as well.

**HODGSON:** You were a part of this.

**PALLONI:** Well, there were two different participants: the militants, the guys who organized, who went to marches, who faced the police; and the guys like me, who preferred to stay away. Yeah, I agreed with a lot of the things [they were doing] but I didn't want to get involved. I didn't want to get terribly involved, let's put it that way. And I wanted to escape from Chile. That was the reason why I ended up applying for a Ford Foundation fellowship, which I got in part because of a friend of mine who was involved with the Ford Foundation. So there you have it, a leftist person—

**HODGSON:** So you did want to get out then?

**PALLONI:** —a person from the left who is applying to the Ford Foundation. [laughter]

Look, when you think about it you say, no, no, no; this is really unlikely. So yes, I was part of that, and at the beginning it was a very intense period. And then you could tell it was all coming to an end.

**HODGSON:** So when you were in Washington, Blalock was there, and you had that initial interest in quantitative sociology. Was it really that one Preston demography course that got you into demography?

**PALLONI:** Yes, absolutely. Although I must say there were two other demographers there. Pete Guest, who later became editor of *Demography*, I did not have a great deal of contact with Pete but he was an intellectual stimulus there. And the second person is James McCann. James McCann died a long time ago. He was one of the smartest persons I have ever met, but also one of the most self-effacing and [self-]destructive individuals, in the sense that he would have great ideas, he would write something that was, in my view and the view of others, great, but he would toss it into the garbage can. He thought it was just bad. He died peacefully. Jim, Sam, and Pete were part of the protective entourage I had in Washington. There was another, a political scientist, Michael Hechter, who also was very important in my career. And a final person is Herb Costner, a methodologist who was also part of that group of people who were doing causal models—

**HODGSON:** With Blalock?

**PALLONI:** Yeah, with Blalock. Costner was the one who taught a course in methods, which I still remember, you know—one of the best courses I've ever had. But in addition to that I had contact with people in the department of statistics, because I wanted to take courses in statistics. In Washington at the time, Statistics was in the Math Department, if I remember correctly. So I took a bunch of courses in stochastic processes and things of that sort.

**HODGSON:** Now, did your sort of intrigue with mortality come from Preston—

**PALLONI:** Yes.

**HODGSON:** —or was that always there?

**PALLONI:** No, no. I don't think I was ever interested in mortality. I don't understand. It was Sam.

**HODGSON:** It was a viral infection. [laughter]

**PALLONI:** It was Sam, in fact. And Sam actually encouraged me to write. These are things that I shouldn't say, probably. There was a paper that was published by Ron Gray, which was about the decline of mortality in what was called then Ceylon, which is now Sri Lanka.

**HODGSON:** That was malaria that went down two thirds—

**PALLONI:** There you go.

**PALLONI:** So there was this guy Meegama who had put this argument that the decline of malaria explains the entirety of the decline of mortality in Ceylon.

**HODGSON:** I remember that.

**PALLONI:** And Ron Gray came on board with another argument. And Sam was involved because he was writing his famous paper at the time and he said, "Write a column on Ron Gray." So I wrote this and it was an immature student manifestation of his ignorance. I wanted to demonstrate that I knew a lot, and I was overly critic. The comments appeared in *Population Studies*. This was my first publication.

And I still remember that Sam was in touch with James Trussell at the time for some reason. And he sent him a letter and he said that he had read the comment that I had written and told Sam, "You grow them vicious!" So that was my start. I have a good relation with Ron Gray, even after that. That was my first [publication]. Yeah, The interest in mortality is entirely Sam's responsibility.

**HODGSON:** Now Washington had an ongoing demography center at the time?

**PALLONI:** Yeah.

**HODGSON:** Were there any grad students there?

**PALLONI:** Very small group, I must say—one of the first population centers.

**HODGSON:** Because everybody was coming when you were coming in '73.

**PALLONI:** Right. Exactly. It was one of the first center grants, if I remember correctly. And it was partly I think that went together with the census project. The first micro census data were produced at Washington under Sam's guidance, and that coincided with the creation of the population center.

And as far as students, there was only one student who was an RA [with whom] I had a close relationship. The others were the type who would say, Palloni is a rate-buster.

**HODGSON:** So you did well?

**PALLONI:** I did very well. I actually got an award--their Howard Woolston award to the best graduate student of, I don't know—

**HODGSON:** In Washington.

**PALLONI:** Yeah. And I do have the experience of taking the prelim in demography. Sam and Jim McCann generated problems. This was an exam in demography where they wouldn't ask me, summarize the demographic transition theory. It was like a math exam—they [proposed] problems that they couldn't even solve. They realized this after the exam. I went to Jim McCann and said, "But how do you solve this?"

**HODGSON:** I hope this was a take-home exam?

**HODGSON:** No, no, no. This is in a room as big as this one. I was the only one there and I was struggling with this thing. I said, how can I solve this? You had five hours. It was one of those old-fashioned five hours and you had a short break. You were not allowed to talk with people. This was an exam that was one problem after the other.

**HODGSON:** It was burning down your memory at that time.

**PALLONI:** No. They told me, we tailored it [for you]; we thought that you were going to do very well. And I did okay but not great. And then I realized that some of these problems they

could not even solve. How do you solve this? Well, let's see. The argument they used was, we're not interested in the solution; we want to see your train of thought.

**HODGSON:** Interesting.

**PALLONI:** Great excuse but, you know, I got sick [from] stress before, during, and after.

**HODGSON:** So you did finish your Ph.D. awfully quickly. It was pretty fast.

**PALLONI:** Yeah, it was fast. That was the only thing that I did.

**HODGSON:** And you had a couple of short stays before you arrived at Wisconsin. Anything about Texas and Michigan that you can relay?

**PALLONI:** Well, I went to Texas and Texas did have a population research center.

**HODGSON:** It had a Latin American focus, if I remember.

**PALLONI:** Harley Browning was the main guy there. It was a very good experience for me in Texas, but unfortunately I was overloaded with teaching. I taught eight different classes the first two years.

**HODGSON:** Eight different ones.

**PALLONI:** Eight different ones.

**HODGSON:** And you hadn't taught these before?

**PALLONI:** Never. I taught everything from introduction to sociology all the way up to advanced demographic techniques, going through political sociology. It was a matter of some faculty had grants and were not teaching, and somebody had to cover [for] them. And in some universities the assistant professors usually take the burden.

**HODGSON:** So they lost you by asking you to do this?

**PALLONI:** In part it was because of this.

**HODGSON:** Eight courses in two years—new courses—is, for somebody just out, it seems—

**PALLONI:** Yeah. I was also to produce papers, too. But the experience in Texas was good. I met a lot of people there who had some influence on my career, like Dudley Poston, and Parker Frisbie, Omer Galle. Omer Galle I think of as an icon, not just in my career, but my life. A fantastic human being

**HODGSON:** So you get out of Texas and you end up in Michigan?

**PALLONI:** Okay. So here comes the other lucky thing or unlucky, however you want to see it. John Knodel was taking a year of leave and John Liddell was teaching these basic courses in Michigan. And the Michigan pop center didn't know what to do with these courses and—

**HODGSON:** These were basic courses in demography?

**PALLONI:** There were two. They were in demography and population of society—[those] are the core courses that we usually teach.

**HODGSON:** Got you.

**PALLONI:** And John was leaving. Nobody was ready to take them all. And Al Hermalin had heard that I was willing to move and so he convinced me. Al Hermalin is another important person in my life, because when I went to Michigan, he became like a father to me. I mean, I was really—well, anyway, I ended up teaching for a year. Unfortunately, they didn't have a position, otherwise I would have stayed in Michigan.

A year before, Sam had moved to the United Nations and became their population division director. And he called me, he said he had a project on mortality and that he needed help, and I ended up in the United Nations just for the summer. The idea was that I would stay longer. And there I met another person who was very important, Larry Heligman, who recently died. The two of us generated pretty much single-handedly, under the direction of Sam, the United Nations mortality model, which came after the Coale and Demeny life table model. [The UN

model] had a larger input coming from developing countries—life tables--which was very sparse in the Coale and Demeny models. So that was produced there. We produced also a software—actually mostly Larry—to do indirect techniques. Remember at the time indirect techniques in demography was an important core of was being done, at least by demographers with an international bent.

**HODGSON:** So you were looking for a job while you were still in Michigan?

**PALLONI:** I was.

**HODGSON:** Wisconsin at the time was huge.

**PALLONI:** Well, Wisconsin's interest had come too late when I made the decision to go to Texas. And if I had received the offer from Wisconsin, probably I would have gone to Wisconsin. But when I moved to the UN, Aage Sørensen, the chair, heard that I was kind of floating, so they recruited me and I have never moved. The verb move should not be used here. And I'm still there.

**HODGSON:** Who was there at the time? Larry Bumpass was there?

**PALLONI:** Oh, Larry Bumpass, Jim Sweet, Hal Winsborough.

**HODGSON:** Was [Norman] Ryder?

**PALLONI:** Karl Teuber. No, Ryder had moved—

**HODGSON:** To Princeton.

**PALLONI:** —two or three years before I arrived--to Princeton. There is an anecdote about Ryder that I don't think very many people know. When you enter the social science building where we were housed, there is scribbling on the wall with lines suggesting the stature of professors: Bumpass, Sweet, etc... and high up, almost at the level of the ceiling, there was a line marking God's stature. Above it, was Ryder's....

The big project there was the '40-'50 census project. And Hal, who was a visionary in all things computer related, had for the first time bought a large Vax computer. You probably remember the Vax. To run a regression would take you not a day as it would with a Frieden machine but it would take you two, three hours. So they had the Vaxes there; it was an extremely active period. It was intellectually extraordinarily stimulating. Bob Hauser was there and Rob Mare was there. Betty Thomson was there as well. And then the survey started, the Sweet and Bumpass family survey. So it was nonstop activity.

**HODGSON:** Were there particular people that you worked with, colleagues that you connected with?

**PALLONI:** I had quite a bit of interaction with Rob Mare. I worked a little bit with Larry Bumpass and with Bob Hauser. Hauser and Featherman; Featherman had started the aging center. It was the first time then that I met a young Richard Suzman. But the people that I worked most were Rob, Larry, Bob Hauser, and Featherman.

**HODGSON:** Now, when I look at your extensive publications, they go for pages. There seems to be a real pattern. There's a continual focus on mortality and a focus, more so now I think than before, on aging and the biodemography of aging. And you seem to have an intermittent connection with criminology, oftentimes with John Hagan.

**PALLONI:** Yes.

**HODGSON:** And you have an historical focus on Latin American big trends, to mortality, fertility trends. And you've got a theoretical inclination. I think you did diffusion theory.

**PALLONI:** Yes, I did.

**HODGSON:** And you had a couple of more empirical looks at Malthusian theory.

**PALLONI:** Yes. That's the way it goes.

**HODGSON:** And already we're getting into an unusual breadth there, in terms of theory and quantitative, historical, and real contemporary concerns. I love the internal colonialism in it.

**PALLONI:** That's Michael Hechter's influence.

**HODGSON:** Like a blast from Chile in undergraduate years.

**PALLONI:** Well actually, when I arrived in Seattle and I worked with Michael, I became interested in Italy. This is my parents' land. I learned everything that there was to learn about Italy. In Italy there was a neat application of Michael's theory of internal colonialism. So I did that. But, you know, this breadth issue is a curse and a blessing. It's a blessing because, I don't know, it makes it more entertaining.

But it's a curse because you can become schizophrenic. I mean I was doing at some point population and development. I was teaching a course in survival models and then advanced demographic techniques.

**HODGSON:** Did some AIDS work for a while?

**PALLONI:** Oh, yeah, I did. That was an important period, the AIDS model thing.

**HODGSON:** That's my general question. So we can see patterns there. Now, since you did this, can you see an evolution of interest in demographic topics over the course of your career?

**PALLONI:** It's all converging into modeling factors that affect longevity. Here is where comes in my underlying interest and what I hope to pursue, which is evolutionary biology, and to place mortality decline, mortality improvements, into the larger canvas of human evolution, and [to ask] where is this thing going. Is longevity here to stay? I have a series of recent papers that are not in my vita, some of which are being presented here, about modeling and the so-called Barker Effect, that is, the influence of early conditions on late health and adult mortality. The idea is to

translate the theories that are there, from developmental biology mostly, into a formal model that is demographic in content. That in itself is—

**HODGSON:** So this is something you're not going to do in a year?

**PALLONI:** No. I'm looking at four or five years, if my longevity allows.

**HODGSON:** That's good.

**PALLONI:** The idea is that you can make predictions about what will happen with life expectancy in particular countries. So, for example, the predictions that we're making are that the mortality improvements in Latin America will or come to a halt pretty much generally, unless there are really earth-shattering improvements in medical technology, to arrest, for example, the advances of cancers or cardiovascular disease or diabetes, for that matter, and everything that is related to diabetes. So that's a prediction that comes from this model. And then I want to link this with evolutionary biology, because after all, if it has to do with developmental biology and you're experiencing effects on survival, it must have something to do with fitness.

I must say Ken Wachter, Shripad Tuljapurkar and Jim Vaupel are demographers who have stepped into this thing. They are actually working on what he calls evolutionary demography. Wachter, for example, is doing this not with developmental biology, but with genes—you know, the pleiotropic kind of theory. And formalizing that and putting it in a population context I think is very exciting. It's only a few of us who are working there, so—

**HODGSON:** Well, that's good. So if you look back, what would you say was your most important publication?

**PALLONI:** One that I think nobody ever read except Ansley Coale, who decided to publish it in *Population Index* when he read it. You know, Ansley was the mastermind of *Pop Index*.

[Richard] Hankinson was the editor. You remember that *Population Index* published only one paper per issue then.

**HODGSON:** Right, with the chart or table on the cover.

**PALLONI:** So this paper was presented in a WFS [ World Fertility Survey] conference and it was about formalization of birth interval dynamics.

**HODGSON:** Sounds technical.

**PALLONI:** Very technical. But the idea was, if I have information on birth interval, how can I produce estimates of total fertility rates.

**HODGSON:** Got you.

**PALLONI:** You remember this is the [World Fertility Survey] WFS and we're studying birth intervals, etc. So it was presented in a conference at WFS. I wasn't there because my son was being born more or less at the same time. It was presented by Griffith Feeney and German Rodriguez was the discussant, and they liked it. And Ansley wrote to Sam or something, I can't remember. So I sent him the paper and he just published it as it was. I don't think anybody has ever read that paper other than those three people—

**HODGSON:** You're most proud of that one.

**PALLONI:** I'm very proud because it showed what I could do with what I had learned. The second paper is a paper that I did with Rob Mare, which was never published. It's a working series paper from 1986, I believe.

**HODGSON:** It was never published?

**PALLONI:** No, we submitted it to the *Journal of the American Statistical Association*. They came back with a positive review but with a three- or four-page-long set of [suggested] improvements. I mean, I'm talking about petty details. And I talked with Rob and I said, "Look,

Rob, I don't have time for this." And he said, "I don't have time, either." And there it was. It died right then and there.

**HODGSON:** Wow.

**PALLONI:** It was a paper about how you can model health and mortality using spouse data, a microanalysis of mortality. This is in the early 1980s. If you have spouses you can do something really interesting, so we proposed a set of what were called bivariate survival models, where you have two survival times jointly determined. I still work on those models, like I used them in class as a teaching tool, but it was never published. I have been told not to cite it because it's not published. I did a paper with Doug Massey on migration that came out in the *American Journal of Sociology*, where we applied the same model, but instead of looking at mortality we were looking at migration of siblings and fathers. The model is identical. You just give different names to the various variables. We were trying to test the theory of influence of social networks on migration: that if a sibling migrated, it was more likely that the next sibling would migrate, or if a parent migrated first—and then we constructed an index of future migration. By simply knowing in each household how many people have migrated, what is their kinship, you can predict migration rate for the future. And that appeared in *AJS* and was joint[ly authored] with Doug Massey and students.

**HODGSON:** Now during this time period, when I think back like from '77 up until the end of the twentieth century, the demographic variable that I think was the hottest one, was fertility.

And here you are continually focusing on mortality and—

**PALLONI:** No. Let me correct you. The paper in *Population Index* was pure fertility.

**HODGSON:** There you go, that's true. And as we move into the 21st century, do you think your intrigue with mortality has proven to be—in terms of international, long-lasting consequences—actually the 21<sup>st</sup>-century demographic trend?

**PALLONI:** I think you hit an important point. If you compute the rate of publications, grant proposals, or whatever that are mortality driven, it has increased; it hasn't decreased. I think it has to do with fertility [now being considered] unimportant. Now we're caring about longevity and whether there is variance in longevity across countries, and whether it's going to be with us for a while. Fertility has become kind of what mortality was before.

**HODGSON:** Fertility seems predictable these days.

**PALLONI:** Well, yeah. The range of variation—

**HODGSON:** Mortality is the one we don't know if there is an end point in longevity or not. We have these new trends like middle-aged, US white males increasingly—

**PALLONI:** And the disparity is the most interesting work in this period. This is being done really in mortality. I think mortality is a vehicle to produce collaborations with the biological types, which [are] more difficult in, say fertility or even migration or some of the other areas. The health mortality field is very fertile territory, where you can see collaborations between demographers and biologists.

**HODGSON:** We've got about twenty minutes left and we've got two more topics. We've got a topic on PAA itself as an institution and we have a topic on demography as a discipline, your thoughts on that one. So it looks like you're more intrigued [by] demography as a discipline. Maybe we can zip through some quick questions on PAA. Can you remember your first PAA meeting?

**PALLONI:** Yes. It was in Seattle, the only time that PAA took place in Seattle. I don't understand exactly why it hasn't been there since. It was in 1975, and I was a year away from getting my Ph.D., I think. It was in downtown Seattle and I remember two people in that meeting. I went to all of the sessions. This was a very small thing. I mean, we're talking about maybe a thousand. A thousand seems too big to me. It was a small hotel, a small group of people.

*[Editor's note: the attendance at the Seattle meetings in 1975 was 595:*

[http://www.populationassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/PAA\\_timeline.pdf](http://www.populationassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/PAA_timeline.pdf)]. I remember Ansley Coale. And I remember James Trussell. Those were the two sessions that I went to that are memorable to me.

**HODGSON:** And they're vivid, that's good.

**PALLONI:** Yeah. And that was my first.

**HODGSON:** Since you've been going to these things for an awfully long time, do you see any trends or changes that have happened, in terms of PAA over the years, since '75 to now?

**PALLONI:** Well, let's put it this way. There are two types of trends, human, in quotes, and disciplinary—no, there's a third: organizational. So the group used to be small—I'm talking about the human part now. The group used to be small. It was like going into a family reunion. You remember it.

**HODGSON:** I do.

**PALLONI:** Everybody knew each other. Now you compare this [today]—completely different beast altogether. Maybe it is because younger people are displacing older people and they know a lot less about you, and so you think that nobody knows you.

**HODGSON:** It could be our aging as opposed to—

**PALLONI:** That's an alternative explanation; that's fine. So that's one thing that impressed me right away this year. And you know, Washington DC is usually the site for the largest meetings anyway.

**HODGSON:** Uh-huh, government.

**PALLONI:** Yeah. So if you go to the meeting in San Diego, it wasn't this big. But still, the demography meetings are massive, I will say. [*Editor's note: the attendance of 2,331 people in San Diego in 2015 was a record high until the 2016 meetings in Washington, DC, where the attendance was 2,735.*] Compared to the American Public Health Association, no, it's infinitesimal. [*Editor's note: the APHA expects 12,000 attendees at its 2016 meeting: <http://www.apha.org/annualmeeting>.*] So that's the human part of the PAA.

The organizational part—you probably don't know this or maybe you do. When I was president we had to struggle with three things. The website was a major problem, and it was a problem for the proceeding president and the one who followed. A lot of energy was devoted to it and the website that the PAA has now is a result of those activities during—

**HODGSON:** The website we are talking about is the annual meeting component.

**PALLONI:** The website of the PAA and the annual meeting. Remember it still is the case that the annual meeting is handled at Princeton. But Princeton was financing this, PAA wasn't.

**HODGSON:** Right.

**PALLONI:** And then we had this website that was really complicated. And it's has become something that is good. But how do you create a website? Well, you have to go to some organizations that already have a website and imitate them so you don't—

**HODGSON:** Plagiarism.

**PALLONI:** But it's difficult because PAA is very small and PAA meetings are very, very particular. They're not similar to other [organizations], say the Economics Society. So that's one thing. Second thing was the fund, the Population Fund.

**HODGSON:** Oh, yeah.

**PALLONI:** The year that I was president, I think was the first time that there was a push to move this. And the reason that it happened was because we decided to go to the Gates Foundation to ask for money. Now the reason for [needing] money for the PAA is that PAA is always in a very fragile financial situation. There is a fund there for emergencies. If the meeting can't happen because there is a bombing or something, we have to pay huge amounts of money.

**HODGSON:** That would wipe out that fund.

**PALLONI:** Right. And so we wanted to make sure that there was a fund in addition to that. So the first thought was the Gates Foundation. PAA has something to offer. So we went to the meeting with the Gates Foundation and I still remember Charlie Hirschman was there. I was there, and I a few other people trying to convince the Gates Foundation that this is—

**HODGSON:** A million dollars.

**PALLONI:** No, five hundred.

**HODGSON:** Five hundred.

**PALLONI:** But they said you put five hundred [and we'll match it].

**HODGSON:** Okay.

**PALLONI:** So now we're reaching the \$1 million mark.

**HARDEE:** That's good.

**PALLONI:** That fund now is being used for lots of things. First, to support Princeton's efforts with the website. Second, we have little grants we give to students or to post-docs or pre-docs,

for people who come from abroad the ability to fund their travel, hotels. And so that fund gives a lot of flexibility. But I must say, when we were creating it, there was resistance in some corners of PAA. I mean, I respected very much the opinion of those people. PAA is not in the business of generating funds like other organizations. PAA is a different organization. It's like we wanted to preserve our identity, and generating a fund this way will make us different.

**HODGSON:** I do want to save a little time because you're very excited about the discipline of demography. What do you think the most important issue facing demography as a discipline might be?

**PALLONI:** To preserve its core. I think demography as a core existed years ago. We are talking about Ansley Coale, we're talking about Keyfitz, Bill Brass, Sam [Preston]. Then we're talking about, you know, the Princeton group, the British group, Wrigley and Schofield. I have the impression that with a few exceptions that probably are Berkeley, Penn, and perhaps—but I'm in doubt about this—Princeton, that core is disappearing. It's dissolved and I don't know whether it's for good, for better, or worse, but it is not there any longer.

If you ask how many people know formal demography and use formal demography to formulate a problem and solve it, there are very few. You can count them with the fingers of one hand. The only place where I think this is being done systematically is in Rostock, the Max Planck Institute, where they're forming people that do this. So this core is being preserved [in Germany], a little bit at INED in France and in some of the US institutions I mentioned before

Other than that, I think demography is going in many directions, some of which are very good, some of which are—I don't know what the future is. But demography was invaded by other disciplines. It's being colonized by economists and all sorts of other disciplines.

**HODGSON:** This is going to be my follow-up question. You obviously think of yourself as a demographer and you've got that focus on that core. I will imagine that there's a good chunk of people presenting today and tomorrow who don't self-identify as a demographer.

**PALLONI:** Absolutely.

**HODGSON:** They see themselves as economists, sociologists. Some still do think of themselves [as demographers] but more and more it's not.

**PALLONI:** That's exactly right.

**HODGSON:** Do you think it might be this shift in our data source, and then the European countries now don't have censuses and everything is household survey data with a standard of techniques that economists are quite familiar with, quantitative sociology—

**PALLONI:** Or survey specialists.

**HODGSON:** —and you ask questions about family change, and you ask questions about morbidity and mortality and you ask questions about fertility that from someone coming from this core background, some of those are demographic questions.

**PALLONI:** Yeah.

**HODGSON:** But the people that can do them don't necessarily think of them that way.

**PALLONI:** That's right.

**HODGSON:** They think this is a very important economic question.

**PALLONI:** Or, you know, public health problems, yeah.

**HODGSON:** And we're sharing data and we're sharing techniques that aren't part of that core, more and more.

**PALLONI:** Right. Exactly. I think that that's exactly right. You've [said] it a lot better than I could.

**HODGSON:** Now, is there anything that we can do about this?

**PALLONI:** Well, the question is whether you need to do anything about it.

**HODGSON:** Okay, that is a question.

**PALLONI:** For example, if I think about people working on health, the amount of funds going into data collection of health data is giant. The people who participate in this enterprise are very diverse. There are one or two demographers, but that's it. Think about the National Research Council reports on health disparities across countries in 2011 and 2013. There were some demographers there, but very few. A large fraction of members were from epidemiology, from economics, from different academic constituencies. If you had done that, say, twenty years ago, there would have been only demographers. So now the question is, were those panels better than they would have been had you had only pure demographers? And the answer is, I don't think so. So in a way perhaps we shouldn't do anything.

From a different perspective, I once wrote a paper about the tool kit of demographers that was published, or buried, I should say, in *Genus*. Remember *Genus* was the journal the Italians had? Well, it was published and I said, you know, this is a tool kit. You have to know how to construct a life table. You have to have a cohort/period approach.

**HODGSON:** This might be very generational.

**PALLONI:** As I was saying, if you can't do this, if you're not able to use these models in your head to formulate a problem, maybe the problem will be ill-formulated. Is that right? I don't know. Certainly the stuff I'm working on now, or the stuff, for example, that Josh Goldstein in Berkeley works on now, or the things that Ron Lee produces or stuff that Sam continues to produce, one after the other—I think Sam retired and plays golf: where does he get the time to do this?—those things would not be possible without this core we are talking about. Those products

are very valuable, so I would say the core is useful. Is the core necessary for other things? Maybe not. Maybe a sufficient condition, but it's not necessary. In the case of the work that I was citing—Josh and Ron and Sam—it is a necessary condition. You can't do it if you don't do it that way.

**HODGSON:** So it sounds like you're a little equivocal about that.

**PALLONI:** Yeah, I'm always equivocal.

**HODGSON:** If we define the future in terms of this core set of techniques and tools, then you are a little pessimistic about it.

**PALLONI:** Yes.

**HODGSON:** But you're open to the possibility that maybe there's emphasis on the tools—

**PALLONI:** It's not necessary for some researchers.

**HODGSON:** It's less necessary.

**PALLONI:** It's less necessary for some, yes. Thanks for the correction. It's less necessary for some type of research, definitely.

**HODGSON:** Okay.

**PALLONI:** And it's probably totally dispensable in other research that we do here at PAA. But there is a little bit of nostalgia, you know. This happened to me three months ago. A student in a university that has a center, I said to him, well, this is the kind of thing William Brass—[and he said,] William who? And I said, really, did you study demographic techniques? Yeah, I had a basic course in [demography]. This person is in PAA and—

**HODGSON:** Right.

**PALLONI:** —considers himself a demographer, but doesn't know who William [Brass is]. I would presume if I asked him about Nathan Keyfitz, he would say, I have no idea who that is.

**HODGSON:** Isn't that something.

**PALLONI:** And I think those are the fathers of this discipline. You know, sometimes I've asked myself, what would Kingsley [Davis], Ansley [Coale] or Nathan [Keyfitz] think—

**HARDEE:** Think now?

**PALLONI:** —think if they were—

**HODGSON:** Came back?

**PALLONI:** Yeah.

**HODGSON:** Right.

**PALLONI:** Would they pessimistic? Would they be happy that the discipline has expanded? It has expanded. Disappearing, this is a problem.

**HODGSON:** Right.

**PALLONI:** And I wonder whether that happens to everything that develops. Once it develops, the seed disappears, right? The thing that bothers me a little in demography is that if you go to the physical sciences or to the biological sciences, drastic transformation have occurred. I mean, think about biology. They discovered DNA! So everything that came after that changed completely. That was a shift in paradigm. We haven't had a shift in paradigm in population studies at all. I mean, what do we have? New methods, maybe. They come from statistics. Do those shape the foundations of the discipline? No.

**HODGSON:** We have shifts in policy focus.

**PALLONI:** Right. But that is not the foundation of the discipline.

**HODGSON:** No, it's not the foundation of the discipline.

**PALLONI:** So what changes that we have now are driven by things that have nothing to do with shifting in paradigms of science, and the disappearance of the core and those conditions is worrisome. But, you know, I would still think that it—

**HARDEE:** I'm going to ask a follow-up question. When my kids' elementary school was built on to, the kids had to be displaced [during the construction]. And when they got back in, they didn't have enough space. I said, they didn't have a demographer working with them on projecting how many kids there were going to be in the neighborhood? So my question to you is, do you think we're doing a good enough job training that kind of basic demographer?

**PALLONI:** No. No. And actually I'm glad that you brought that up. That was a point that I had [wanted to make] here. Remember back, say, twenty years ago, applied demography was in existence? Applied demographers are a very lively subset of PAA, and it's a subset that shows that we can teach demography to people who want to do things other than teach in academia. It's something that I insisted on all of the time when I was at Wisconsin: we should not try to teach to train professors only.

**HARDEE:** Yes.

**PALLONI:** We should try to teach people to do—in fact Jim Sweet created a course that was applied demography. Paul Voss was there. And I'm glad that in the PAA this group has enlarged. I'm not too happy that it hasn't enlarged in other areas but it has enlarged in this area, because if this area becomes influential, then the population centers will have to almost—

**HODGSON:** Keep the core going.

**PALLONI:** That's right. They keep the core but it's applied to things that are quote unquote less theoretical. Policy is relevant. We used to do predictions in counties in Texas about the number of school children that were expected. I'm talking about many years ago. That work was always looked upon kind of dismissively, [as though to say,] this is not demography, where are you going to publish this stuff. Well, it's interesting, I know. Yes, this was one of the points that I had to make about applied demography, which I think—

**HODGSON:** We have about a minute left. Do you have any other points you would like to make? Have you had a chance to directly ask about the discipline?

**PALLONI:** The one point that I had here that we haven't talked at all is the international presence of population studies. Back when I was growing up as a demographer, the IUSSP [International Union for the Scientific Study of Population] was a powerful institution. It was a powerful institution that assembled demographers from everywhere, including the US. The IUSSP now is in a weaker position and PAA remarkably is much stronger, I think. And I think that that entails a loss, a loss of diversity in ways of thinking. IUSSP is struggling with funding. PAA is not struggling any more, as far as I know. But this makes it a little bit more provincial. Although I must say that if you look at the program, there are a fair amount of things that are international, but somehow IUSSP coalesced all these things in a very articulated way, whereas in the PAA they're part of a particular session or a handful of sessions. And I think that this goes back to the point that you were making before, that IUSSP grew up from classics like Louis Henry and Jean Bourgeois-Pichat, who were worried about the relation [between] population and development; fertility was the key thing. Remember all of the disputes about whether population enhances development or not: nobody hears about that anymore.

**HODGSON:** No.

**PALLONI:** Within that was the issue of fertility. This is what made IUSSP very—

**HODGSON:** It got too focused. Now, another sort of way of looking at it is you have a whole set of 21<sup>st</sup>-century concerns that are transnational, particularly environmental, [such as] climate change—

**PALLONI:** Well, migration.

**HODGSON:** —migration, all connected with population—

**PALLONI:** Absolutely, yeah.

**HODGSON:** —in a significant way. And you would imagine that an international organization, a scientific population, would be the ideal place where those types of concerns that don't really have the nation as the focal point of policy making [could be explored]. But we have to do something that's humanity wide—

**PALLONI:** Right.

**HODGSON:** —if we're really going to have an impact on that kind of—

**PALLONI:** It's very paradoxical, that it's decreasing exactly when it's most needed. It is difficult to explain. A lot of it is a reluctance—I don't know, I really don't know. I have my theories about why it's happening. But I think it's a sad thing. The migration issues, for example, that they are dealing in Europe right now should be a prime concern to demographers, right?

**HODGSON:** Yeah.

**PALLONI:** To health researchers, to migration researchers, to family people. What organization is taking—

**HODGSON:** Refugee issues in general.

**PALLONI:** Yeah. And IUSSP sponsored and participated in a panel organized by the Population Committee of the National Research Council. This is another point that I didn't make, the importance of that [the Population Committee of the National Academies]. I think of it as the people who think ahead for demography in general because they do have international concerns. They did, together with IUSSP, a series of publications on refugees, the demography of refugees—this is about ten years ago, fifteen years ago—that is very contemporary. It should be revisited. I should attribute a great deal of importance to the National Research Council's

Committee on Population in marking the route ahead. Those are mostly demographers. There's a few economists, but they're mostly identified with demography.

**HODGSON:** Now, our hour is up and I would like to thank you so much for being here today.

**PALLONI:** Thank you very much. Thank you for having me. I feel good to have told you how important randomness is to generate population presidents.

**HODGSON:** Thank you.

*Videotaped by Alex Poole*

*Transcribed by Michelle Taylor*

*Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler, June 2016*

*Reviewed and approved by Alberto Palloni, July 2016*