
Christian Albrecht

At the beginning of the 1970s, a transnational circle of successful businessmen, high-ranking bureaucrats, and renowned scientists who called themselves the Club of Rome gained wide attention in Western industrialized countries and beyond.¹ The reason for their sudden fame was The Limits to Growth, a study commissioned by the club’s executive committee and published in 1972 as the first in a series of reports presented to the club.² Based on a computerized world model, the book — which belonged to the diverse, semi-scientific field of future studies — called for a policy to stop economic and human population growth. It fostered a fierce debate about the worldwide effects of economic and demographic growth and, today, counts as the most influential of many ecological doomsday prophecies that mark the early 1970s as the starting point of an “Era of Ecology.”³

Founded in 1968, only a few years prior to the publication of the Limits report, the Club of Rome was initially launched by a small group of influential Europeans as follow-up to a conference that took place at the Academia dei Lincei in Rome — hence its name. Its early members were part of the economic, intellectual, and political elite of Western industrialized countries, and many of them had close contacts to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) — which successively transformed into an Atlantic institution during the 1960s.⁴ At the same time, the club’s members thought of themselves as “a group of world citizens, sharing a common concern regarding the deep crisis faced by humanity.”⁵ They referred to this crisis as the

¹ This essay is part of my PhD project on the history of the Club of Rome which I am currently conducting at the Research Group for Global Processes at the University of Konstanz.
Meadows et al., Limits to Growth, 10. The problématique is further described as including a range of diverse problems such as “poverty in the midst of plenty; deg- radation of the environment; loss of faith in institutions; uncontrolled urban spread; insecurity of employment; alienation of youth; rejection of traditional values; and inflation and other monetary disruptions.”

On Atlanticism, see, e.g., Kenneth Weisbrobe’s contribution to this volume and his The Atlantic Century: Four Generations of Extraordinary Diplomats who Forged America’s Vital Alliance with Europe (Cambridge: 2009).

An interesting overview on the concept of mental maps, see Jörg Döring and Tristan Thielmann, eds., Spatial Turn. Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften (Bielefeld, 2008).

An interesting overview on diverging visions of how the Cold War might have (or ought to have) ended can be found in Frédéric Bozo, Marie-Pierre Rey, N. Piers Ludlow, and Bernd Rother, eds., Visions of the End of the Cold War in Europe, 1945-1990 (New York: 2012). For a historical account of the concept of world order, see Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, eds., Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s–1930s (New York, 2007).


The Club of Rome is, therefore, a suitable lens for the study of transatlantic relations in the postwar era. By scrutinizing the club’s early history, this essay aims to show how the Atlantic Community and its underlying mental maps have been reconceptualized along global parameters within certain parts of the establishment in Atlantic countries since the end of the 1960s. It thus addresses the question of how the club’s founding and its aims were affected by visions of the Atlantic Community in a widening world order, a worldview based on systemic and cybernetic thinking, as well as by hopes of ending the Cold War. Therefore, the debates over the Limits to Growth during the mid-1970s, which historians have already dealt with exhaustively, are not addressed in detail in this paper. Instead, it contributes to recent research identifying the transition from the 1960s to the 1970s as a decisive break within the “transatlantic century” and a period of time characterized by the “shock of the global” — a common perception of a rapidly changing and increasingly complex world.

This essay begins with a discussion of Aurelio Peccei, the first president of the Club of Rome, and his emerging concerns about a global crisis and a faltering Atlantic partnership that eventually led him to outline a “new approach” to transatlantic cooperation (world) problématique, which Limits to Growth describes as “the complex of problems troubling all nations.” Thus, visions of the Atlantic partnership in a fast-changing world as well as European voices — especially its primary founder and first president, the Italian industrialist Aurelio Peccei — played a significant role in laying out the club’s course of action during the first decade of its existence.
and global development. It then addresses the launch of the Club of Rome as a loosely organized network rooted in the methodological and transnational context of futures studies, building on contacts that went beyond the Western world and transcending even the Iron Curtain. The third and final section looks at the club’s impact within an Atlantic context up until the early 1970s. Thus, it deals with its attempts to define and address the problématique, which eventually led to the publication of the Limits to Growth. In the conclusion, I reflect upon the ways differing visions and discourses about the Atlantic Community and broader ideas of “one world” interacted during the 1960s and 1970s.

Addressing the Problems of the Future: Aurelio Peccei’s “New Approach” to Transatlantic Cooperation and Global Development

Aurelio Peccei (1908–1984), born in Turin, Italy, was a trained economist and a successful industrial manager with wide-ranging contacts in Europe, the United States, and Latin America who was actively involved in the global project of modernizing the Third World during the 1950s and 1960s.11 His distinguished career started in the early 1930s, when he joined the Italian motor company Fiat. He was sent to China but returned to Italy after the outbreak of the Second World War, during which he fought against and was imprisoned by the Fascist government. Following the end of the war — and a short intermezzo as cofounder of the Italian airline Alitalia — he eventually returned to Fiat, where he was put in charge of the company’s Latin American enterprises in 1949. From then on, he built up the subsidiary Fiat Concord in Buenos Aires, turning it into one of the leading motorcar and railway material companies on the continent, which contributed to the modernization of Argentine agriculture as the first firm to manufacture tractors inside the country.

But by the end of the 1950s, at the age of fifty, Peccei had become increasingly dismayed by “the miserable, hopeless condition of some of the least-developed zones” that he came across during his travels and, as he later recalled, “I started asking myself whether I was actually doing what I ought to be doing.”12 It was around this time that — after freeing himself from some of his Fiat commitments — he began to devote increasing personal time and energy to the crusade for development in poor countries. In 1957, he founded a small
research center within Fiat Concord, where he hosted conferences to further address the problems of underdeveloped countries. At the same time, against the backdrop of the Suez crisis, he launched the nonprofit engineering and consulting firm Italconsult, which he headed until the end of the 1970s; its aim was to help the development of Third World Mediterranean countries. In 1964, shortly before he returned to Italy to become vice president of the struggling typewriter and electronics company Olivetti (while retaining a position as special advisor to Fiat, as well as his office in Buenos Aires), Peccei was also involved in setting up the Atlantic Development Group for Latin America (ADELA).

Originally started as an American project, ADELA was a collective effort by corporations from the Atlantic countries and Japan — which had joined the OECD earlier in 1964 — to increase investment in the private sector in Latin America. While one of its main initiators, U.S. Senator Jacob K. Javits, praised its launch as a victory for the promotion of “our common Judeo-Christian ethic and progressive economic principles,” Peccei was less optimistic. He neither shared Javits’s hopes of winning the Cold War by modernizing the Third World, nor did he “think that the best way to boost a sagging economy . . . was to give free rein to its private sector.” Nevertheless, as Peccei states in his autobiography, he hoped that ADELA “would prime a process of modernization and rationalization of local industry” and, simultaneously, modify the “unconstructive and short-sighted attitude of European and American industrial and financial circles” toward investing in Latin America.

Soon after his involvement in the creation of ADELA, Peccei became convinced that the negative effects of technological development affected not just the Third World but could also be felt in the industrialized countries. Until then, he had never published any articles or books, nor had he spoken publicly on topics other than those concerning his work as a manager. But from the mid-1960s onward, he began to refine and publicly promote his thoughts about global development and mankind’s most pressing problems. In 1965, he began writing several articles and held a series of lectures in Latin America and the United States. Two years later, feeling that his calls to address mankind’s problems had gone unheard, he started to “condense . . . my fears and my hopes about the future” in his first book, published as The Chasm Ahead in 1969.
In one of his earliest lectures, “The Challenges of the 1970s for the World of Today,” given on the invitation of ADELA at the Military College of Buenos Aires in 1965, Peccei had painted the picture of a global crisis caused by modern technology: Man had lost control over the accelerating “techno-scientific progress” that had started with the Industrial Revolution and had up to that point only been held at bay by the “military stimulus” provided by national defense or war preparedness. This process of ongoing scientific and technological development had now reached an unprecedented level, as was shown by the apocalyptic possibilities of total nuclear destruction.18 Thus, Peccei called for “a longer term global political approach” that would make use of modern computer technology in order to synthesize mankind’s ever increasing knowledge and enable mankind to tackle “the real problems of the next decade: survival in the nuclear age . . ., overpopulation, hunger in large parts of the world, [deficits in] education in the broadest sense, [finding] justice in liberty, [making sure there is] better circulation and distribution of wealth.”19

In 1965, he did not yet express concern about environmental pollution or resource depletion but imagined his international initiative to be primarily aimed at “enlarging and consolidating the area of prosperity which exists today in the world”.20 It was only a few years later, in Chasm, that he included the “degradation of our ecosystem” in the “tidal wave of global problems” humanity would face in the future. He never consciously reconciled these newfound concerns — which had only begun to spread from the United States to Europe in the mid-1960s — with his plans of global development and equality.21

In his public talks and writings Peccei also expressed special concern about the stability of the Atlantic partnership. In his lecture in Buenos Aires, he had stated that “the second industrial revolution” in automation and management had “exploded in the United States” and left the rest of the world lagging behind.22 On this occasion, speaking to a group of Latin American managers, he further argued that Europe and the United States threatened to “move further apart psychologically from one another” because of the increasing “technological gap” between the two sides of the Atlantic.23 He further addressed the technological gap in Chasm, which he promoted in newspapers as “an urgent call from Europe for Atlantic Union” to prevent “the growing gap between Europe and the United States” from becoming a “chasm.”24
Such a gap between Europe and the United States was first postulated and debated by French economists such as Pierre Cognard, Jean Jacques Servan Schreiber, and Louis Armand. They promoted a common European market and the development of science and technology as a way to oppose American political and economic dominance during the mid-1960s. By the end of the 1960s, with transatlantic political and economic cooperation at its lowest level since the end of the Second World War, the OECD and private organizations committed to preserving Atlantic cooperation picked up on their concerns. It was in this context that Peccei — who would become the first chairman of the newly founded Committee for Atlantic Economic Cooperation at the Atlantic Institute for International Affairs in 1967 — criticized President Johnson’s aim of creating a “Great Society” as an “ego-centric one, which would carry [the United States] too far forward.”

Peccei was convinced that to stop Europe and the United States from drifting away from each other and to tackle the global crisis effectively, the developed nations had to accept their responsibility for world leadership. In his writings produced from 1965 onward, he outlined what he in *Chasm* would call a “New Approach” to Atlantic cooperation that was to place “the Atlantic Community in a global context”. While he expected the United States to take the lead in his plan for global development, Europe, on the other hand — which he viewed as still being the “focal point of the world” — was to remain “a link between the America which lives in the future and those regions which live partly in the past.” His New Approach was clearly rooted in ideas of an Atlantic Community, which he primarily understood not as a political alliance but as an entity possessing “a homogeneous cultural basis” rooted in Greek philosophy, Roman law, Christian religion, and Latin and Anglo-Saxon languages. Still, he envisioned a policy leading to the “fusion of the communities on both shores of the Atlantic” for which he espoused the motto “first European Unity, then Atlantic interdependence.” He seems to have supported ideas of an equal political and economic partnership between the United States and a united Europe — as promoted
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In 1966, Peccei sketched out his vision of global development based on the Atlantic Community in detail in a paper entitled “Developed-Underdeveloped and East-West Relations,” which he presented in the United States on the invitation of Business International Corporation, a leading American advisory firm, and published in 1967 in the Atlantic Community Quarterly (see Figure 1):

The world is represented by a strong core where the main forces of progress are centered and which exerts leadership; and that is in fact the Atlantic Community . . . This image may be compared to the layers of an onion, and there are three principal layers around the Atlantic core [Europe, the United States, and Canada]: The special relationship countries [the Eastern European, Mediterranean, and Central American countries, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand]; the great outside development regions [the Soviet Union and its satellites and South America]; and areas of later development [Africa and Asia].

Peccei understood the countries of the first layer to be “a logical extension of the Atlantic Community,” thus they were to be developed “as rapidly and as homogeneously as possible.” He described the Soviet Union and its satellites as a developmental region since they had not experienced an economic rise similar to that of the Western European countries. Asia and Africa, finally, were the last regions to be included in the growing community of prosperity. It is clear therefore that, even though Peccei’s worldview adopted a strongly Western-centric perspective, it differed significantly from the views of those neoliberal conservatives — described by Quinn.
Slobodian in this volume — who wanted to deny the black population of the African continent the blessings of industrialization and technology.

As one can see from his writings, Peccei’s thinking was also based on ideas of “One World.” In *Chasm*, he went on to describe his global plan, articulated in his earlier papers, as “a kind of model for the next decade with an Atlantic-centered, development-oriented, unitary view of the world.” During the late 1960s, when the first photographs from outer space appeared, older discourses revolving around a unified earth regained momentum, joined, at the same time, by new ecological metaphors such as the notion of “spaceship earth” — a term coined by Barbara Ward and prominently promoted by Kenneth Boulding. In *Chasm*, referring to the works of Boulding (and other influential thinkers such as Sir Julian Huxley and Bertram Gross), Peccei himself described how the idea of “one world” first emerged after the Second World War when multinational corporations started “thinking and planning globally” along the lines of worldwide strategies. He further stated that this “process of progressive globalization or planetarization,” which he understood as a “process of creating new institutions superseding the family of nation-states,” had now become visible in the push for European integration.

Considering his biographical background and his geopolitical thinking, it is possible to describe Peccei as a member of a transnational capitalist class that contributed to new discourses on globality and “managing the planet” that were based on a feeling of urgency and crisis, a strong belief in the leading role of the Atlantic Community, visions of an integrated world, and a technocratic worldview.

Futures Studies, the OECD, and the Birth of the Club of Rome

In 1967, Peccei’s attempts to address mankind’s problems experienced an unexpected boost when the speech he had given in Buenos Aires two years earlier happened to be translated into English without his knowledge. His ideas then caught the attention of influential members of major intergovernmental organizations, including British...
civil servant and science policy planner Alexander King (1909–2007). King, who was at that time the general director for scientific affairs at the OECD, was well informed about the debates regarding the technological gap and shared Peccei’s concern about the dark sides of industrialized societies and the unwanted global repercussions of technological development. He was very impressed with Peccei’s outline of the global situation even though, in contrast to Peccei, he was mainly interested in the effects of science and technology within the Western countries. When the two men first met a week after King had read Peccei’s paper, “this was the beginning of a range of discussions which finally led to the creation of the Club.”

In the 1960s, industrialized countries in Europe and Northern America were still experiencing a widespread planning euphoria — both on the state and (especially in the U.S.) corporate levels. Along with this came the expansion of bureaucracies and an almost exponential increase in the number of scientists, (big) research projects, and scientific institutions. It was in this context that Peccei — who had wide-ranging experience in corporate planning — had advocated in 1965 that computer-based forecasting techniques be applied in order to address the global crisis he had identified. King, too, was convinced that this was the way to go. Both men initially came across technological forecasting, which was based on military research first invented during the Second World War, while visiting the United States in the late 1950s. The sites they visited included the notorious Research and Development Corporation (RAND), which started as a U.S. Air Force project in the 1940s and opened up the first forecasting department for social research in the 1950s. It was within the United States that forecasting methods, which were generally based on the methods of systems analysis and cybernetics that deal with control and communication in “open systems” (i.e., systems that are able to learn), had first been applied to provide policy advice for the U.S. military.

39 Peccei, Human Quality, 62–63; Alexander King, Let the Cat Turn Round: One Man’s Traverse of the Twentieth Century (London, 2006), 294–96. For more on the story of Peccei and King’s first acquaintance, see Moll, From Scarcity to Sustainability, 61–62.

40 King, interview, quoted in Moll, From Scarcity to Sustainability, 61. See further King, Let the Cat Turn Round, 279–81 and 297.


43 Daniel Bessner’s contribution to this volume discusses the Rand Corporation.

As the Austrian systems scientist Erich Jantsch showed in a report for King’s department at the OECD produced in 1967, the use of technological forecasting had increased immensely within the OECD countries during the postwar decades. By the mid-1960s, some European thinkers such as Gaston Berger and Bertrand de Jouvenel, the founder of the journal Futuribles, sought to provide an alternative to the extrapolative forecasts produced within most American think tanks, promoting instead a more “critical” approach to planning that could be applied not just to military concerns but also for the good of mankind. In 1967, this “normative” approach was discussed in Oslo at the first international meeting on futures studies (also referred to as futurology or future sciences), “Mankind 2000.” The practitioners of this growing and heterogeneous research field were generally concerned with the production of long-term forecasts, tended to use systemic or cybernetic methodologies, and, thus, often expressed a holistic worldview. In this respect, they differed from most specialized natural and social scientists, such as the scholars of the “Frankfurt School.” During the 1960s and 1970s, futurologists, like other scientists, were able to act as experts on politically relevant topics and, thus, gained the attention of political decision-makers and, sometimes, of the general public.

Peccei had attended the conference in Oslo and had already been in touch with several European futurologists such as Bertrand de Jouvenel — whom he had known since the 1940s and later described as his “intellectual mentor” — and Ossip K. Flechtheim. By the time he met Alexander King, he was convinced of the potential of cybernetics and futures studies for synthesizing different fields of knowledge in a way that could be usefully applied to global problems. It was during this time that he became increasingly involved in discussions about the creation of an international scientific institute that could make use of systems analysis in order to address “the shared problems of industrial nations” — an idea that President Johnson had prominently put forward in 1966 in order to facilitate relations between capitalist...
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Introduction and communist countries. Johnson’s vision was eventually fulfilled six years later, in 1972, with the launch of the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in Laxenburg, Austria. From 1967, Peccei — who was instrumental in facilitating talks between the United States and the Soviet Union — had been a principle proponent of the IIASA. At the beginning of 1968, however, its launch was still far away as talks between the other countries involved, and especially the two superpowers, turned out to be rather unproductive.

In addition, the rise in student revolts increased Peccei’s feeling of urgency about addressing the global crisis. He was greatly worried about the “thousands and thousands of young minds . . ., the students of our universities, rebelling in their seats of learning against certain aspects of the society they are about to enter.” Therefore, convinced that the situation was “ripe for a group of qualified non-political European personalities to open discussion among themselves . . . on how . . . to devise new ways of conducting human affairs more rationally in this nuclear-electronic-supersonic age,” he and Alexander King started to organize a European meeting entitled “Problems of World Society: New Approaches to System-Wide Planning.” According to Peccei, this undertaking was inspired by some of his “American friends” — most likely those involved in the talks about the launch of IIASA — who had suggested “that the initial move [concerning the establishment of an international institute for system analysis] should come from us Europeans.”

After he managed to acquire funding through the Agnelli Foundation, a research and cultural institute honoring the founder of Fiat, the meeting eventually took place on April 6 and 7, 1968, in Rome at the Villa Farnesina, the headquarters of the Academia dei Lincei. Present among the thirty “economists, planners, geneticists, sociologists, politologues, and managers” from Western Europe were several

50 Johnson, quoted in Egle Rindzeviciute, “Towards a Social History of the Purification of Governance: The Case of the IIASA.” Paper Presented at the Conference ‘Governing the Future’ (15 June 2010), http://www.interdisciplines.org/paper.php?paperID0102. Peccei himself states in his autobiography that Johnson’s ideas were directly inspired by a presentation he had given earlier that year at the U.S. State Department and the White House. Peccei, Human Quality, 50-51.

51 U.S. Senator Hubert Humphrey, who had known Peccei since the early 1960s and had been among the initiators of ADELA, and Jermen Gvishiani, vice-chairman of the State Committee for Science and Technology and son-in-law of Soviet Premier Aleksey Kosygin, led negotiations on the American and Soviet sides, respectively. Gvishiani had actually come across the copy of Peccei’s ADELA speech even before Alexander King, whom he contacted in order to find Peccei Pauli, Crusader for the Future, 62–69. For more on the founding of the IIASA, see Giuliana Gemelli, “Building Bridges in Science and Societies during the Cold War. The Origins of the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA),” in American Foundations and Large-Scale Research: Construction and Transfer of Knowledge, ed. Giuliana Gemelli (Bologna, 2003), 159–98. During the 1970s and 1980s, the IIASA was involved in the development of what later became the Internet. See Frank Dittmann, “Technik versus Konflikt. Wie Datennetze den Eisernen Vorhang durchdrangen,” Österrz 59, no. 10 (2009): 101–19.

52 Peccei, Chasm, 271. See also King, Let the Cat Turn Round, 292. For more on worldwide protest in the late 1960s, see Martin Klimke, The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties (Princeton, 2010); Philipp Gassert and Martin Klimke, eds., 1968: Memories and Legacies of a Global Revolt (Washington, DC, 2009).

53 Aurelio Peccei, Letter to Franco Archibugi (22 February 1968). This letter is located in box 37 of the Aurelio Peccei Papers, quoted from here on as AP/Box number. These boxes are currently stored at the Dipartimento di Scienze dei Beni Culturali at the Università degli Studi della Tuscia in Viterbo, Italy.

54 Peccei, Letter to Franco Archibugi.

55 Ibid., and Peccei, Chasm, 251.
influential futures scholars. On Peccei’s request, Erich Jantsch, King’s colleague at the OECD, had prepared a paper entitled “A Tentative Framework for Initiating System-Wide Planning of World Scope” as a basis for discussion. In this essay — a synthesis of Peccei’s ideas and those of other thinkers such as the British evolutionist Julian Huxley and the American planner Hasan Özbekhan — Jantsch addressed the problem of uncontrolled technological growth and proposed an international approach toward planetary “normative planning,” i.e., including rational goal-setting. He concluded that “[i]t dawns on us now that there is no inherent cybernetics in the system; no self-regulating ‘automatism’ of macroprocesses: the cybernetic element in the evolution of our planet is man himself and his capacity for actively shaping the future.” Drawing again on Peccei’s thoughts, he proposed an international effort for a “feasibility study for system-wide planning of world scope,” entitled “Project 1968.”

However, as Peccei admitted in *Chasm*, the conference turned out to be “only a partial success” because participants proved unable to agree upon a methodological framework. The fact that most of the two days at the Academia dei Lincei were spent discussing the difference in meaning between the English word “system” and the French word “système” further led Peccei to conclude that “[i]n such matters as thought and culture, Europe’s fragmentation is evident.” King, who less diplomatically called the whole thing a “complete flop,” later also recalled the conference as having been somewhat influenced by a certain anti-American spirit. He states in his autobiography that “[t]o some it was unthinkable to have the Vienna Opera House and the RAND Corporation on the same continent,” to which he recalls replying that “it was impossible to imagine a future Europe that did not have both.” As this statement makes evident, King, like Peccei, saw the United States as a role model for Europe, which appeared to be at least partially stuck in the past.

It was during a private meeting following the unfortunate end of the conference that the Club of Rome first saw the light of day. After the conference had ended, Peccei invited some of the participants to a private dinner at his house. Besides Alexander King and Erich Jantsch, Peccei’s guests that evening were Swiss engineer Hugo Thiemann, French economist and head of the French Planning Department Jean Saint-Geours, and Dutch diplomat Max Kohnstamm (who was also a close associate of Jean Monnet). Contemplating what had gone wrong during the conference, they eventually founded a “steering board”
to “maintain intra-European contacts and eventually suggest some path of action.” It is this “closing of the ranks” that eventually came to be remembered as the birth of the Club of Rome, which therefore started as a European undertaking. Soon, new members from across the Western industrialized countries — including Japan — joined the group, most of whom were, in one way or another, connected to Alexander King and the OECD.

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Following the club’s founding, King and a few other of its then current or future members started to put the negative qualitative aspects of economic growth within “affluent societies” on the OECD’s agenda — a topic first prominently described by the American sociologist Kenneth Galbraith in 1958. In 1969, the OECD’s outgoing General Secretary Thorkil Kristensen — who had been involved in the discussions of the group around King and officially joined the Club of Rome just a few months later — urged the ministers at the OECD’s Ministerial Council Meeting to pay attention to what King had conceptualized as “the problems of modern society.” There, following the lines of Peccei’s arguments and President Johnson’s ideas about the creation of the IIASA, Kristensen (a Danish economist who had headed the OECD since its creation in 1961) pictured a world in crisis struggling with interrelated problems such as overpopulation, urban dwelling, environmental pollution, and the alienation of the individual. It was only against this backdrop that the OECD — which then, as King remembers, was still the “high-tabernacle of economic growth” — started to question economic growth as a goal in itself and to address its negative qualitative effects.


67 King, Let the Cat Turn Round, 293. In 1961, the OECD had set itself the ambitious goal of raising the gross national product of its member states by 50 percent within one decade. According to Schmelzer, “The Crisis before the Crisis,” 1001–1002, the OECD had been mainly responsible for promoting a “quantitative growth paradigm,” which implied that most social problems could only be solved through the stimulation of economic growth.

According to Matthias Schmelzer, the promotion of these newfound concerns within the OECD was motivated by the desire to safeguard the institutions of the Western welfare state, which seemed to be threatened by the protests of 1968 and “seemingly new and interrelated phenomena of crisis.” The same can be said about similar

63 Peccei, Chasm, 252.

64 Apart from Peccei, everybody present at the club’s founding meeting either worked for the OECD’s Secretary (King and Jantsch) or were part of its Committee on Science and Technology Policy created in 1967 (Saint-Geours, Thiemann, Kohnstamm). In 1972, only two of the five members of the executive committee did not have an OECD background, namely, Peccei himself and the German engineer Eduard Pestel, who was instrumental in organizing funding for the Limits project. For more on the Club of Rome’s close ties to the OECD, see below. For a membership list of the club, see Moll, From Scarcity to Sustainability, Appendix B, 279–300.

65 On the Club of Rome’s close ties to the OECD, see below. For a membership list of the club, see Moll, From Scarcity to Sustainability, Appendix B, 279–300.
projects launched almost simultaneously such as NATO’s “Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society,” discussed by Kenneth Weisbrode in this volume, which the Nixon government intended as a means to increase East-West dialogue through the discussion of environmental policy.69

Toward the Limits to Growth (and Beyond): A “Non-organization” Addresses the World Problématique

Ultimately, the Club of Rome came into being because its founding members, most of whom were high-ranking bureaucrats themselves, were frustrated by the large and inefficient bureaucracies of national governments and existing international institutions such as the OECD.70 Convinced that a loose organizational structure would be better suited to addressing the manifold and entangled problems that lay ahead, they eventually came to describe the function of the Club of Rome — which was incorporated as a nonprofit private association in Geneva under the Swiss civil code in March 1970 — as that of an “invisible college” or a “non-organization.”71 It was thus supposed to act without a formal secretariat or budget, stimulate research in order to analyze mankind’s problems from a global, systemic, and long-term perspective, and was intended to be “nonpolitical in the sense that its members are not involved in current political decisions, and that it has not itself any ideological or national political commitments.”72 The club’s membership, numbering only 25 at the end of 1969, increased steadily and was eventually limited to one hundred members; as was pointed out repeatedly by Peccei and King, this limit was necessary to “maintain . . . a coherent working group.”73 Its exclusiveness led (and continues today to lead) to a range of conspiracy theories about the club, whose members certainly thought of themselves as some kind of avant-garde.

The Club of Rome may therefore best be described as an exclusive, loosely organized, all-male network of influential individuals mostly from the global North who shared a broad understanding of an Atlantic Community, a common feeling of looming global crisis,

69 See further Jacob D. Hamblin, “Environmentalism for the Atlantic Alliance: Nato’s Experiment with the ‘Challenges of Modern Society’,” Environmental History 15, no. 1 (2010): 54–75. According to Schmelzer, “The Crisis before the Crisis,” 1011–12, the OECD’s attention silently shifted away from the problems of modern society debate after the economic crises of the early 1970s and again turned toward more quantitative topics such as recession, the North-South dialogue, energy shortages, and stagnation.

70 Alexander King later stated that “bureaucracies of governments, even more than the ministers, are post facto mechanisms. They only react after events, and do not foresee them.” Alexander King, “Interview: Club of Rome Founder Alexander King Discusses His Goals and Operations,” EIR 8, no. 25 (1981): 17–29, 19. Compare also Peccei, Chasm, 263–64.


and an affinity for the methods of futures studies. Its operations were run by an executive committee, consisting of Peccei, King, and a handful of other club members who met frequently. It was Peccei, however, who became the first president of the Club of Rome and dealt with its workload almost entirely by himself (assisted only by the two secretaries at his Italconsult office in Rome). His outstanding intellectual and organizational commitment led some early observers to conclude that “the Club of Rome was really for the most of it the Club of Peccei.”

Following the initial meeting of the club, the group around Peccei and King met frequently at the Battelle Institute in Geneva, the European branch of an American think tank, which was headed by Hugo Thie- mann. It was there that they further discussed the ideas articulated by Peccei and Jantsch, which were not undisputed within the group. In fact, Kohnstamm and Saint-Geours thought Peccei’s holistic and global approach to addressing mankind’s problems hopelessly over-ambitious. Thus, they proposed that a project concentrating on just one aspect of the observed crisis (e.g., urban problems) be created. Since no compromise could be found, they left the group during its second meeting.

By the end of 1968, Peccei, King, and the remaining members of the executive committee started looking for someone who could provide the methodology for the research project outlined by Jantsch’s essay and Aurelio Peccei’s Chasm. It was at another conference, held by the OECD in November 1968 in Bellagio, Italy, that the club’s search for a project supervisor gained momentum. King and Peccei were deeply impressed by a paper presented on this occasion, entitled “Toward a General Theory of Planning” and written by the American scholar of Turkish origin Hasan Özbekhan. Özbekhan, who taught economic planning at the Systems Development Corporation at UC Santa Monica, had compiled a list of “Continuous Critical Problems” and emphasized the use of computer models and systems theory to analyze this set of problems. After Peccei asked him to join, Özbekhan produced a proposal for a research project on “The Predicament of Mankind” in which he drew on Peccei’s and Jantsch’s writings. His project aimed to create several world models based on the underlying norm of “ecological balance.”

It was in this draft that Özbekhan coined the term of a global and “all pervasive problématique” that would become the club’s key concept.
throughout the following decades. He stated that in the context of a complex reality of worldwide cause and effect interconnections it was inappropriate to speak of certain “problems” that implied the search for certain “solutions.” Therefore, in order to avoid this “fragmentation of reality into closed and well-bounded problems,” he introduced the notion of the *problématique*, which he defined as a “meta-problem (or meta-system of problems).” But in 1970, at a meeting of the club’s members in Bern, Switzerland, Özbekhan’s proposal, heavily criticized for being too complex and infeasible, was buried then and there, both for these reasons and because it failed to attract funding from other organizations. Nevertheless, Peccei and the remaining members of the executive committee continued to promote Özbekhan’s notion of the *problématique* as the key underlying concept of the Club of Rome.

After Özbekhan’s project was dropped, Peccei and the executive committee of the Club of Rome eventually decided to support a different project in order to better publicize their message. They commissioned the American engineer and MIT systems scientist Jay Forrester, whom they knew from the Bellagio conference, to produce the outline for a new research project. Forrester applied his modeling approach of “systems dynamics,” initially developed for urban surroundings, to a world-scale model in order to address the problems identified by the Club of Rome. A working group was set up at MIT headed by Forrester’s assistant Dennis Meadows that consisted of Meadows, his wife Donella, and some graduate students. Funding was made available through Eduard Pestel, a professor of mechanics at the Technical University of Hanover, by the German Volkswagen Foundation — of which Pestel was a board member. Based on Forrester’s methods, Meadows and his team created a computerized model of the world. Two years later, their results were published as “The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind.”

Based on the calculations made using their computerized model of the world system, Meadows and his team concluded that “[i]f the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years.” They further stated that ongoing growth would most likely lead to “a rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity.” Seeking to avoid

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78 Ibid., 5.
79 Ibid., 13. As an example of the fragmentation of reality, Özbekhan stated that “the particular solution called ‘agriculture’ may possibly no longer represent the single, feasible resolution of the problems clustered under words such as ‘hunger’ or ‘malnutrition’.” Ibid.
80 Peccei, Human Quality, 71-72. See further Moll, *From Scarcity to Sustainability*, 64, 67-68.
81 Moll, *From Scarcity to Sustainability*, 70-72, 76-81, 93-94.
82 Meadows et al., *Limits to Growth*, 23.
such a scenario of “overshoot and collapse,” they proposed a global policy to stop population and economic growth in order to reach a “global equilibrium,” a state of “ecological and economic stability that is sustainable far into the future.”

Following the publication of the book, the club gained further influence on policymaking in the Atlantic countries, even though many of the club’s members themselves did not support the book’s radical call for “global equilibrium” and zero growth. The book’s arguments soon entered political debates revolving around the need for more sustainable societies. The club’s executive committee continued to commission new reports that addressed the problématique—or one or more aspects of it. To promote these reports, Peccei and his peers organized meetings in different parts of the world, some of which were attended by the host countries’ prime ministers or their representatives. Still, none of the reports that followed was nearly as influential as Limits to Growth.

Before they had started working with Özbekhan, Peccei and King had also tried to use their personal contacts to discuss their goals with other scientists and decision-makers. However, even though they managed to meet with a range of politicians from within the industrialized Western countries (including Austrian Chancellor Josef Klaus, members of the Nixon administration, and Canada’s Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau), they soon felt that their “ideas and suggestions seemed too far off to have any policy significance.” Following the success of Limits, they revived their attempts at influencing top-down policy implementations and organized several nonpublic meetings of club members with prime ministers or their representatives from smaller Western countries and Third World countries — including Canada, Austria, Senegal, and Mexico — to discuss the problématique and, at the first meeting in 1974, the Third World’s call for a New International Economic Order. Still, the significance of this “World Forum” for actual policy implementation seems to have been minor to nonexistent.

What seems to have been more important in influencing policy was the founding of national chapters of the Club of Rome over the course of the 1970s in many Western industrialized countries. These national associations were often founded independently by members of the international Club of Rome, again mostly drawing on contacts from within the OECD. Operating almost entirely autarkically, they generally helped to promote new reports published by the international club and, in some cases, managed to have considerable success.

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83 Ibid., 184. See further ibid., 156–84. While the assumptions in Limits were heavily based on Peccei’s thoughts as expressed in Chasm — e.g., concerning the aspect of population growth — Limits did not propose any developmental goals concerning the poor areas on the planet, in contrast to Peccei. Compare Peccei, “Challenge of the 1970s,” 106, and idem, Chasm, 164–76.

84 See Onuf, “Reports to the Club of Rome.” At the end of the 1970s, the club’s focus changed again toward promoting what was then called “sustainable development.” Moll, From Scarcity to Sustainability, 175–223. On the reaction to the Limits to Growth within the Club of Rome, see ibid., 105–15.

85 King, “Interview,” 209.

in introducing environmental topics and getting futures studies to be applied within national policy settings. Among the most active of these chapters — some of which started to produce their own reports — were those in Canada, founded in 1974 with the approval of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, and in the United States, which Peccei had vehemently pushed forward until it was created in 1976. The membership of the American chapter, which sought to “convince the leadership of the country that . . . ‘arrangements for systematic, integrated, long-range planning’ can operate effectively within the U.S. government,” consisted mainly of academics. Its main protagonists included diverse characters such as Claiborne Pell, senator for the state of Rhode Island; Carroll Wilson, professor for electronics at MIT and a member of the executive committee of the Club of Rome; and John A. Harris IV, an industrialist and environmental activist.87

Until the end of the 1970s, however, the public impact of the Club of Rome and its national associations had decreased, among other reasons, because of the increasing age of the club’s members, the general decline of future studies, whose prognoses had been proven wrong many times, the spectacular failure of cybernetic warfare in Vietnam, and the appearance of environmental NGOs that dealt with one or more aspects of the global problématique.88 Last but not least, the technocratic understanding of the earth as a manageable system, promoted by the Club of Rome, came increasingly under question as diverging visions of globality emerged that were based on calls for individual self-limitation in a finite world.89

Conclusion: A Transnational Public Sphere of Experts

This article has shown that within the context of the Club of Rome, European voices were indeed quite important, if not crucial within industrialized countries for articulating a concern with the side effects of technology and unlimited growth on the global environment during the late 1960s and early 1970s. During this time, the dialogue between Europeans and Americans increasingly addressed the global connections of the problems observed.90 The Club of Rome’s deliberations on the negative effects of technology and industrialization were closely connected to its members’ personal involvement in the global “modernizing missions” of the Atlantic countries — both in the Third World and in rebuilding Europe. It was against this background that Peccei and King came to interpret a range of economic, ecological, political, social, and cultural problems as symptoms of a complex

87 John A. Harris and Berrien Moore, Feasibility Study: Establishment of a U.S. Chapter of the Club of Rome (August 1975) [Unpublished paper to be found in AP/56], 34 pages, here 24. On the Canadian chapter, see Jason L. Churchill, “The Limits to Influence: The Club of Rome and Canada, 1968 to 1988,” diss. University of Waterloo, 2006, http://hdl.handle.net/10012/747. The Japanese national chapter of the Club of Rome was also quite active. It was launched in 1969 by a group of Japanese scholars who worked with the OECD. The main figure of this group was Saburo Okita, who was a member of the executive committee of the Club of Rome until he became foreign minister of his country in 1977.


89 Kuchenbuch, “Eine Welt”; Andrew G. Kirk, Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism (Lawrence, 2007); Fred Turner, From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism (Chicago, 2006). The wish for individual limitation in a finite world, which Kuchenbuch calls a “moral glocalization,” was most prominently expressed within the slogan “think globally, act locally,” which the Club of Rome took over and promoted as its new guideline in the 1990s.

Transcending the Atlantic World

Introduction

The crisis in modern industrialized society — in a way anticipating modernization theory’s downfall as a scientific paradigm beginning in the early 1970s.91

The European founding fathers of the Club of Rome understood the powerful technology of American culture as the best tool for addressing the problems of the future. Moreover, even though the mission of the Club of Rome came to be explicitly framed by a language of globality, its launch was inherently based on an Atlanticist understanding of the international order. In the wake of a whole range of globally interconnected problems, Aurelio Peccei was convinced that the Atlantic Community needed to be first reaffirmed and then enlarged by the inclusion of other parts of the industrialized world. It is indeed interesting to note, in this respect, that some of the club’s early members — namely, Saburo Okita, Carroll Wilson, and Max Kohnstamm — also became founding members of the Trilateral Commission in 1973. Similar to Peccei’s anticipation of the outline of the Club of Rome, this network of European, American, and Japanese businessmen and politicians was based on the image of an Atlantic Community expanding to become a community of the world’s most developed regions.92

At the same time, Peccei and most of his peers considered a united Europe to be a valuable part of the Atlantic Community. Those in the United States who supported the club’s perception of modern society in crisis shared this view, as evident in Aurelio Peccei and other members of the club’s executive committee being invited to the first Woodland Conference on sustainable development in Williamsburg, Texas, in 1975. The sponsor and convener of this conference, George P. Mitchell, invited Peccei and his peers because he “felt that Europeans, being from older societies, were far ahead of Americans in paying attention to new problems caused by population growth and resource depletion . . . and . . . were less afraid of government intervention that would turn problem recognition into policy.”93 As in the pre-World War II era, the transfer and application of ideas across the Atlantic Ocean was, of course, not just a one-way street of Americanization.

The field of future studies offered Peccei and his peers the opportunity to discuss and promote their ideas within what Alexander Schmidt-Gernig calls “a transnational public sphere of experts.”94 It also provided them the possibility of acquiring resources for further action. Against this background, the members of the Club of Rome pursued a global, holistic, and technocratic top-down approach to

92 Quite similar to the Club of Rome, the Trilateral Council, consisting of approximately 300 influential businessmen and politicians from the United States, Europe, and Japan, was significantly influenced by its principal founder the American billionaire David Rockefeller, whose goal was to “bring the best brains in the world to bear on the problems of the future.” Holly Sklar, “The Commission’s Purpose, Structure, and Programs. In Its Own Words,” in Trilateralism: The Trilateral Commission and Elite Planning for World Management, ed. Holly Sklar and Trilateral Commission (Boston, 1980). 83–89, here 83. On Saburo Okita’s role within the Trilateral Commission, see Takano Hajime, “A Guide to the Japanese Membership,” in ibid., 123–32.
93 This view is expressed by Mitchell’s biographer Jürgen Schmandt, George P. Mitchell and the Idea of Sustainability (College Station, 2010), 43.
policymaking based on a long-term perspective. They may, therefore, be analyzed in terms of belonging to an “epistemic community” that promoted a vision of “planet management.” Accordingly, the influence of the club as a “transnational pressure group” was always rather “indirect and gradual through changes in public opinion” and was often “exerted through changing attitudes on the part of political leaders . . . and . . . leading industrial and banking groups in many countries.”

In retrospect, the early history of the Club of Rome shows us how different discourses about the Atlantic partnership, globalization, and one world interacted and circulated within Western elites — and even beyond. Therefore, the example of transnational nonprofit organizations such as the club (or the Trilateral Commission) makes it clear that we need to combine the approaches of Atlantic history with those of an intellectual history of globality and globalization in order to better conceptualize turning points in the history of Atlantic relations during the twentieth century.

Christian Albrecht is a graduate fellow in history with the Leibniz Program “Global Processes” at the University of Konstanz. His research focuses on intellectual history and the history of science in the contemporary Atlantic world. His dissertation, entitled “The Club of Rome in an Intellectual History of Globalization: Promoting Ideas of Global Crisis and Global Order during the Cold War Era,” analyzes the intellectual and cultural roots of the globalization paradigm in Europe and North America during the Cold War era.


