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Too many bodies? The return and disavowal of the population question

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During the 1960s and early 1970s population growth was regarded as an urgent environmental issue. Since then the topic has fallen into abeyance. Despite continuing demographic expansion and anxieties about a range of socio-ecological problems – from the stresses of high-density urban living to climate change, water, energy and food insecurity and loss of bio-diversity – there is currently scant consideration of the benefits of population stabilisation or decline. Indeed, the problematisation of population numbers is widely disavowed or regarded with profound suspicion. Why have we become so reluctant to ask whether we are too many or to countenance policies that might discourage further growth? I identify five discourses – population-shaming, population-scepticism, population-declinism, population-decomposing and population-fatalism – that foreclose public debate and subject them to critical analysis. I end by eliciting signs of a hesitant revival of the population question alongside the enduring potency of silencing discourses.

Keywords: fertility; population; limits to growth; immigration; sustainability

In 1950 world population had recently exceeded 2.5 billion. By 1990 it had doubled and by 2020 it will have tripled. October 2011 marked one among numerous demographic milestones on this expansive journey as the 7 billion threshold was crossed. This is in line with conclusions to the United Nations' 2010 revision that 'world population is expected to keep rising during the 21st century', albeit more slowly during the latter part. It projects some 9.3 billion of us by 2050 and over 10 billion by the century's end (United Nations 2010). Such an ongoing increase surely conveys an alarming story to anyone concerned about environmental sustainability and social wellbeing. Or does it? I ask why concerns about population growth and over-population have

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virtually disappeared from the political agenda of developed countries, especially, since the mid-1970s. Have they simply forgotten about, even resolved, the issue? Or is it rather, as my analysis suggests, that problematising it has been foreclosed? For despite periodic eruptions of concern among democratic publics, members of the policy community have been noticeably reluctant to address these anxieties. Even among critical theorists and Greens, scant attention has been paid to the topic over recent decades. Indeed, it is noticeable that insofar as population numbers are mooted as a contributor to socio-ecological problems – from environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity to food and water insecurity or deteriorating wellbeing – pre-emptive dismissals swiftly follow.

The analysis that follows identifies five categories of silencing discourse: population-shaming; population-scepticism; population-declinism; population-decomposing and population-fatalism. These are analytic distinctions. In practice the discourses overlap or work in conjunction, the most obvious factor they share being antipathy to the Malthusian equation between population growth and resource shortages. But these are not merely analytic categories; they are also profoundly political. Each has a distinctive genealogy in terms of its ideological and professional investments, the political interests it serves and the narratives in which it is embedded. The more that key demographic variables become amenable to policymaking, the greater the impact of the discourses that frame them.

It is not my contention that arguments for disavowing the population question are simply specious; but I do think they warrant critical investigation. Do they offer good enough reasons for excluding population talk from public debate or for dismissing certain types of policy intervention? For it is widely acknowledged that more people, especially as they become more affluent, exacerbate environmental dilemmas like climate change. It is also plausible to interpret manifold expressions of public disquiet as diffuse responses to experiencing higher-density living yet for whose articulation no politically acceptable discourse currently exists. In sum, there is surely a case for returning to the population question by re-framing it in light of twenty-first-century conditions. But this will only be feasible insofar as certain historical legacies and current investments in this contentious matter have been addressed.

Who is talking about whom?

The focus of my analysis principally concerns population talk in developed countries. The issue of population numbers is a global and highly variable one but there are some good reasons for revisiting the topic in this context. Over recent decades there has been particular reluctance to pose the population question here, yet it is within these regions that the great narratives and overarching theories of population growth or stabilisation developed. Their views disproportionately influence current transnational discourses that frame global perceptions of demographic trends, as well as affecting these trends

materially through aid for family planning. Furthermore, many developed countries have entered an unprecedented demographic phase of low fertility that brings the possibility, following centuries of population growth, of stabilising or reducing their own numbers. From an environmental perspective this would appear to be a desirable course, especially since it is among these affluent, high-consuming peoples that most per capita ecological damage is being done. As the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) acknowledges, most environmental problems 'tend to be aggravated by population growth and greater population size', with 'slower population growth in both developed and developing countries' being beneficial (UNFPA 2008, 2009, pp. 6, 19). Rekindling discussion about numbers thus appears timely. Yet my analysis shows how a taboo on considering the merits of population stabilisation is complemented in developed countries by a policy framework that favours higher birth rates and net inward migration as a condition of sustained economic growth. On the other hand, there are signs that the population question is resurfacing, suggesting that the reigning silence and disavowal of the topic just might be dissipating. In this case, open and far-ranging public debate about population matters is crucial.

Population talk in more developed countries operates at three levels: concerning their own demographics; concerning trends in developing countries; and regarding global numbers more generally. Regarding their own population size, first, it is helpful to summarise a few salient elements of Malthus' argument in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (2004 [1798]). Malthus claimed that while the means of subsistence develop in a linear manner, population grows exponentially. These different tempos reach a critical threshold as productive land is exhausted; a situation of disequilibrium he associated with more developed countries like Britain. Either population growth must thenceforth be reduced through rational means, notably by sexual abstinence, or, if these 'preventive checks' fail, more painful 'positive checks' will ensue as the unsustainable excess falls victim to famine, disease or war, thereby restoring balance (Malthus 2004).

It is hardly surprising that such views should have provoked antagonism. Anti-natalist ideas about curtailing the proliferation of the human species challenged deep-seated traditional beliefs. In raising the spectre of excessive numbers, the population question crossed vitalist and religious taboos regarding the sanctity of life and privileging of human life. It challenged Enlightenment ideas about humans' mastery of nature and political economists' views on the engine of prosperity. It touched on some of humanity's most fundamental ideas about the sacred, life and death, as well as on some of its most enduring identities and rituals regarding the family, marriage and sexuality. Demographic change entails three principal variables: fertility, mortality and migration. All provoke profound ethical questions, especially once the state involves itself biopolitically in their modification.

During the 1960s, Malthusianism nevertheless acquired fresh resonance in advanced industrial countries where there was renewed anxiety about a

population explosion (Ehrlich 1972, Meadows *et al.* 1972, Goldsmith and Allen 1972). Despite the post-war baby boom the rate of increase here was relatively modest, but the multiplication of increasing affluence by larger numbers suggested imminent catastrophe. The Malthusian alternative between choosing limits or facing disaster was widely rehearsed. New reproductive technologies and feminist challenges to conventional gender roles seemed to make population stabilisation more viable, yet the task of restoring equilibrium between population and environment seemed no less difficult given predilections for sustained economic growth. Reducing population nevertheless became integral to an environmental sensibility that mobilised new social movements and found common cause with new left critiques of consumer capitalism (Marcuse 1964, 1972). Limits-to-growth arguments accordingly provided the framework for a radical discourse in which economic and population growth were recognised as mutually reinforcing and equally exponential, thus exceeding the capacities of a finite planet. Restoring balance suggested a fundamental social transformation in which fewer people might use technology creatively to improve the quality of lives sustained by less toil, wasteful consumption or excessive reproduction but enriched by a more harmonious relationship with nature. By 1969 even President Richard Nixon was warning Congress that the domestic pressure of 200 million Americans was threatening democracy and education, privacy and living space, natural resources and the quality of the environment (Nixon 2006, pp. 775, 777). Official reports to both the American (1972) and British (1973) governments advised stabilising population numbers in the national interest. Yet this anti-growth orientation would shortly fall into abeyance, with the very language of limits or constraint being rejected.

On a second level, developed countries express concern about population growth in developing countries, where most increase now occurs. I want to emphasise here the way this concern rebounded to reframe their own views on the population question. On the one hand, radical arguments for controlling fertility in economically advanced nations were complemented by support for population control policies in the global South, where they provoked accusations of racism. My account of population-shaming shows how third-world suspicion about first-world motives rebounded to render the topic uncongenial to democratic publics. On the other hand, while many governments in developing countries still struggle to contain their burgeoning populations (United Nations 2011), new anti-Malthusian discourses in developed countries are helping to reframe their views, thanks to the circulation of transnational discourses through bodies like the United Nations or World Bank and via non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and academic currencies. So even here, the epic story of runaway population growth that formerly galvanised efforts at fertility reduction has become muted: despite regional demographic differences, discursive frameworks are increasingly global and hegemonic.

Finally, there are more generic concerns within developed countries about the effects of world population growth on the global environment. It is in this

context of sustainability that renewed anxieties have recently been expressed in reports I classify as population-fatalist. These generally recognise that the multiplication of relatively small but expanding ecological footprints in poor countries plus the larger ones imprinted by richer individuals are collectively responsible for exacerbating phenomena like climate change (Wire 2009, O'Neill *et al.* 2010). As the *Living Planet Report* 2008 concludes, 'with the world already in ecological overshoot, continued growth in population and per person footprint is clearly not a sustainable path' (WWF 2008, p. 29). The All Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health (UK) endorses the view that 'world population growth poses serious threats to human health, socioeconomic development and the environment' (APPG 2007, pp.1, 3). Yet while such claims suggest that world population numbers are hesitantly being re-problematized, demographic solutions are routinely rejected as too controversial or inefficacious to contemplate.

Population talk in developed nations is, in conclusion, a complicated matter because it is mediated by its policy applications in foreign contexts where wider geopolitical relationships imbue it with intense political and affective charge. Yet this interaction also engenders discursive convergence as transnational discourses circulate, thus endowing dominant frameworks with capacities to frame global perspectives. The significance of major world population and development conferences hosted by the UN warrants particular mention here. The prelude to each mobilised considerable ideological posturing and conflict, national policy statements and NGO activity, while they left in their wake important reports, action plans and agendas that would frame approaches over the ensuing period. Three such conferences – in Bucharest (1974), Mexico City (1984) and Cairo (1994) – have been particularly significant, to the extent that the name of their location is sufficient to identify the new paradigms exemplified there.

Discourses of dismissal and disavowal

Population-shaming

Among my five silencing discourses, population-shaming is most indicative of the poisonous legacy of North/South relations. Like population-sceptics, its protagonists reject claims that there is an objective demographic growth problem. Rather than charging neo-Malthusians with misplaced anxiety, however, they suggest that ostensible concerns about over-population are a subterfuge for pursuing heinous ulterior motives (Furedi 1997). The *humus* of population-shaming is a pervasive suspicion that limiting population actually means limiting certain categories of people who are deemed redundant or undesirable. Those who persist in advancing such arguments risk public humiliation for playing a numbers game that is interpreted as a blame game: one in which the world's problems are refracted through population growth and blamed on the incontinent fecundity of the less privileged, whether they be the poor, women or inhabitants of the global South. Sometimes advocates of

population stabilisation are presented as misanthropic people-haters, as when Murray Bookchin (1991, p. 123) asserts that deep ecology ‘blames “Humanity” as such for the ecological crisis – especially ordinary “consumers” and “breeders of children”’. Sometimes they are charged with misogyny, inasmuch as women’s fertility is blamed for under-development or family planning programmes are credited with promulgating unsafe contraceptive procedures (Hartmann 1987, Rao 2004). But the most serious charge concerns racism, linked here to colonialism, eugenics and genocide. As an article in the *New Statesman* (2004) states: ‘We dare not discuss population growth lest we be called racist’. But why is this association so pervasive? Are environmental or wellbeing arguments for reducing future numbers necessarily, even if unintentionally, racist? Or is the connection a contingent one embedded in particular histories?

In order to trace the genealogy of this association, analysis of a brief discussion in Hardt and Negri’s book *Multitude* is instructive (2004, pp. 165–167). The relevant discussion occurs in chapter 2.2 where it concludes a subsection entitled ‘Global Apartheid’. ‘Finally’, they write, ‘we should add, as in a sinister cookbook, one final ingredient’ that completes the global topography of power and exploitation. ‘Most discussions of demographic explosions and population crises . . . are not really oriented toward either bettering the lives of the poor or maintaining a sustainable total global population in line with the capacities of the planet.’ *Multitude*’s provocative claims regarding their ‘real’ concerns rely on strategic signifiers that *précis* a particular political past. Reconstructing this past can therefore help in assessing the contingency of the three linkages the authors make between population concern and racism.

First, despicable motives are attributed to population agencies, which are condemned for disguising their real aims through humanitarian rhetoric. This allegedly hides their true agenda (racism) and practices (coercive), which are claimed ‘in fact’ to represent the dictates of international institutions and national governments. International agencies are charged not only with sponsoring compulsory sterilisation but also with ‘withholding from some populations aid for food or sanitation infrastructure’ with the specific aim of culling the world’s poor. Multinationals’ ‘thirst for profit’ is presented as complementary to a broader racist project in which ‘poverty and disease become indirect tools of population control’. In short, both sorts of Malthusian check are identified here: the preventive type being imposed coercively and the positive kind cynically being left to run its course. In the context of developing countries they acquire distinctly racist significance.

Such charges are not unfounded, with India especially commending itself as the referent for Hardt and Negri’s invective. Mass famines there had sometimes been presented by colonial administrators as salutary checks on over-population. Neo-Malthusian views would subsequently persuade the new republic to initiate the world’s first family planning programme (1952) but it soon found itself dependent on foreign aid and mired in geopolitical interests. While at home Americans were fretting about the domestic effects of a

population explosion on the environment, abroad their Cold War anxiety linked population growth to social instability and hence vulnerability to communism. Following disastrous harvests in the mid-1960s, food aid to India was used by the Johnson administration as leverage to insist on a robust family planning programme whose respect for human rights was noticeably deficient (Caldwell 1998, Rao 2004, Connelly 2006). These equations formed the basis for considerable hostility to the population establishment and its Western supporters, with opposition being eloquently rehearsed by third world delegates to Bucharest in 1974 (Finkle and Crane 1975, Hodgson 1998). They interpreted population policies advocated by the US government as neo-colonial and racially-motivated while accusing the West of blaming population growth for poverty rather than recognising the international capitalist system as the principal cause of under-development.

By situating the population issue in the context of the mid-1970s, Hardt and Negri invoke genuine dangers of state interference in demographics. But they also draw on a particularly febrile period when population was a cipher for broader ideological struggles. Because they are unspecific about these circumstances they imply that all family planning programmes with wider demographic goals are coercive and racially-motivated. Despite *Multitude's* focus on the poor, its authors ignore the bleak effects of rapid population growth on the everyday lives of those who inhabit slums or the misery of unwanted pregnancies for those whose need for contraception remains unmet (Davis 2006, Stephenson *et al.* 2010). Nor can they consider the global consequences of increasingly affluent populations, since ecological concerns have been ruled out as mere hypocrisy.

A second association between population policy and racism is made via allusions to eugenics. Hardt and Negri condemn those who are 'concerned primarily with which social groups reproduce and which do not'. For much of the twentieth century the project of improving the species' genetic stock had influential adherents but by the 1920s, negative eugenics entailed sterilising the degenerate: the insane, the criminal, certain races. This policy gained its most notorious expression under Nazism as population policy became genocidal. The link in *Multitude* is undoubtedly reinforced by its authors' indebtedness to Foucault, who explains that treating population as a matrix of different races permits the state to kill others as a condition of making life healthier (Foucault 2003, p. 245). In an age of colonial ambitions race accordingly justified genocide, while for eugenics programmes killing the enemy was a way to purify one's own race. Historically, such references remain very powerful. Yet again, the link to population policy is specific and contingent. It is surely not a good enough reason to avoid population talk in the current century although it does provide a good explanation for our proclivity to do so.

In a third linkage, Hardt and Negri refer to 'racial panic': a phenomenon elsewhere referred to as 'race suicide'. In light of the decline of white European populations, they argue, perceptions of a demographic crisis primarily concern racial composition: the increasingly 'darker color' of European and world

populations. 'It is difficult', they argue, 'to separate most contemporary projects of population control from a kind of racial panic'. The term race suicide emerged early in the twentieth century when President Theodore Roosevelt condemned families who chose to produce merely two progeny: a nation that wilfully reduced its population in this way would deservedly commit race suicide, he maintained, adding that the differential fertility rates among Anglo-Saxons and immigrants might deliver an especially regrettable form of race suicide (Roosevelt 1903). It is indeed the case that population policies have sometimes been motivated by nationalist or ethnic desires to increase a people's powers by multiplying more strenuously than its competitors. But this is not limited to white European populations; it is more typically associated with selective pro-natalism and population concerns are not reducible to eugenic ambitions, especially when it is the affluent who are most unsustainable.

Hardt and Negri are helpful for illustrating how vulnerable demographic policies, especially those designed to achieve differential birth rates, are to racism and xenophobia and how susceptible to entanglement in broader geopolitical struggles. The warning remains salient inasmuch as such connections have acquired renewed resonance in light of unprecedented migration flows since the mid-1990s. In developed countries, immigration has replaced fertility as the principal demographic variable provoking public anxiety about population growth (United Nations 2000, Coleman 2010), with concerns about overcrowding and the environment again being interpreted as cloaks for racism. The connection certainly reinforces the sense in which population numbers are an inherently controversial issue. But does it not also show why anxieties provoked by demographic change must be subjected to public deliberation rather than being summarily rejected as too shameful to acknowledge?

Population-scepticism

Although demography is for the most part an arid quantitative discipline, it also has its own narratives and these provide conduits for ideological investment. This section begins with a brief discussion of demographic transition theory (DTT), which is currently the dominant narrative and is responsible for population-scepticism among experts. By scepticism, here, I mean doubt that there is any longer a population problem since fertility is declining almost everywhere. In the latter part of the section I consider a more political variant of population-scepticism that suggests population growth is not detrimental anyway. In this case I show how the population-scepticism promulgated by demographic revisionists has become entangled with neoliberal and social conservative values. Both variants of population-scepticism are hostile to an alternative Malthusian narrative. In the first case this is judged anachronistic; in the second it is rejected as predicated on fundamental misunderstandings of modernity's capacities for sustained growth.

DTT comprises one of the great narratives of modernisation (Kirk 1996, p. 384). As Lee and Reher (2011, p. 1) write of transition, this 'historical process ranks as one of the most important changes affecting human society in the past half millennium, on a par with the spread of democratic government, the industrial revolution, the increase in urbanization, and the progressive increases in educational levels of human populations'. DTT identifies four demographic stages that are integral to modernisation. Relatively stable populations with high fertility and mortality (DT 1) are disrupted by biopolitical regimes that reduce mortality rates. This causes rapid population growth because there is typically a lag before fertility drops correspondingly (DT 2). Thereafter, low mortality is matched by low fertility: the transition proper. Growth nevertheless continues thanks to the momentum of large, youthful populations (DT 3). Only in a final stage is transition completed as the population ages and growth stops, thereby restoring equilibrium albeit at a higher level (DT 4).

This account stifles the population question by contextualising it. If population growth is caused by the second stage it is observed most anxiously in the third, yet by then fertility is already falling. While developed countries are currently in the final stage of transition, exponents of DTT maintain that most of their developing counterparts are advancing through the third stage and all are expected to follow suit. There is indeed considerable empirical evidence supporting fertility transition and the theory is useful for classifying the demographic situation in particular locations. It is nonetheless worth making some critical observations about the theory's predictive powers and its relevance for the future, given that transition is routinely cited to justify demographic complacency.

Critical theorists will recognise that DTT exemplifies modern grand narrative structure (Szreter 1993, Greenhalgh 1996), its rhythm of two phases of equilibrium punctuated by a hiatus being typical of such narratives. It claims universal applicability but European experience provides its template and ideal. A problem arises insofar as diverse transitional patterns are classified as manifestations of a deterministic mechanism guaranteeing that transition will everywhere be completed. This greatly enhances the sceptical potency of the theory but like other modern end-of-history arguments, it relies on dubious teleological assumptions to inflate its predictive claims. For example, DTT presupposes that secular, Western attitudes to contraception and family size will prevail, yet it is by no means certain that this can be relied upon in a multicultural world in which religious, patriarchal cultures are gaining relative demographic advantage (Norris and Inglehart 2004, Kaufmann 2010). It assumes there is no Malthusian trap whereby high fertility forecloses opportunities for development, for example by suppressing capital accumulation.

While current projections are broadly congruent with DTT expectations, this is unsurprising inasmuch as projections must extrapolate from current trends, a practice that relies on assumptions themselves furnished by DTT

optimism. Projections ‘must not be confused with current reality’ precisely because their ‘assumptions reflect the spirit of the era in which they are framed. To them are transmitted its hopes and fears’ (Le Bras 2008, p.153, van de Kaa 1996, ONS 2008, pp. 23, 24). Their uncertainty is indicated by the production of several variants. So while the UN’s oft-cited medium variant for 2100 is 10.1 billion, this increases to 27 billion were 2005–10 fertility rates to remain constant (United Nations 2010, p. 1). In short, there are no guarantees that fertility will decline universally or irreversibly. Ironically, since worldwide completion of transition relies on contingent factors such as the willingness of international donors to fund family planning programmes, population-scepticism helps to disincentivise the very policies fertility decline depends on and to challenge projections’ accuracy.

Let us assume, however, that population does stabilise around 10 billion or perhaps declines thereafter. Would this be a good enough reason for dismissing population growth anxieties, as sceptics do? Might environmentalists not still wonder whether such levels are sustainable or desirable, especially when coupled with aspirations for global economic development and equity and in light of current ecological challenges? Should those who currently urge pronatalist policies in order to increase the post-transitional birth rate as a driver of economic growth not be challenged to justify their arguments in relation to the longer-term wellbeing of future generations and the planet? There is an important distinction here between scepticism levelled at the prospect of continuing demographic growth and normative doubts regarding the social benefits of living at thickening densities. Yet it is partly to suppress such reflections on the merits of returning to smaller populations, I now suggest, that population-scepticism has been embraced by neoliberals as an antidote to limits-to-growth arguments.

An excellent place to start disentangling this political dimension of population-scepticism is the ‘Policy Statement of the United States of America at the United Nations International Conference on Population’ (The Whitehouse 1984). My analysis is designed to show the high ideological stakes the population game had assumed by the 1980s as neoliberal interests invested in population-scepticism. Despite developing countries’ antagonism to American-led initiatives on population control in Bucharest, many had introduced donor-dependent, national family planning programmes by the 1980s because they regarded population growth as detrimental to development. It was in this context that the intervention of the Reagan administration, in an official document preparatory for the Mexico City conference (1984), represented a dramatic shift in perspective.

The *Statement* insists that centralised targets for reducing population have no place in ‘the right of couples to determine the size of their own families’ (The Whitehouse 1984, p. 578). Such arguments have affinity with population-shaming but with two important differences. From the neoliberal perspective it was East/West rather than North/South political relations that were at issue, while the link between population policy and coercion was made from the

point of view of the political right rather than left. A dichotomy was now constructed between coercion and voluntarism, the implication being that reproductive rights are antithetical to state intervention because this is *ipso facto* coercive. Population-scepticism is advanced here by displacing the problem of population growth onto a problematisation of the (socialist) authoritarian state.

While exponents of DTT are sceptical that population increase remains a problem since growth rates are slowing, the Whitehouse (1984, p. 576) advanced the bolder claim that growth is itself a 'neutral phenomenon'. 'The relationship between population growth and economic development is not necessarily a negative one'. Whether growth is an asset or an obstacle depends, rather, on exogenous factors among which state regulation of the economy is primary. Such claims are in fact relatively agnostic compared to the fully-fledged demographic revisionism that has become the sceptical mainstay of neoliberal, pro-growth arguments. Julian Simon (1977), one of demographic revisionism's principal proponents, maintains that population growth is in the longer run beneficial for economic growth and the environment because more people are a spur to and resource for hard work, ingenuity and technological innovation. This approach continues to furnish the standard riposte to limits-to-growth arguments: bigger populations are held to be sustainable because the inventiveness of more people will endow ecosystems with the resilience needed to accommodate them (see for example Australian Government 2011).

Where population growth remains a problem, free markets were presented by the Reagan administration as a panacea. Thus 'economic statism' not only hinders development by stifling individual initiative; it also disrupts 'the natural mechanism' for slowing population growth. This natural 'controlling factor' is glossed as 'the adjustment, by individual families, of reproductive behaviour to economic opportunity and aspiration. Historically, as opportunities and the standard of living rise', it is argued, 'the birth rate falls'. This is allegedly because 'economic freedom' engenders 'economically rational behavior' that includes responsible fertility choices (The Whitehouse 1984, pp. 575–576). The invisible hand of competitive markets is thus complemented by a homeostatic demographic mechanism in which economic growth and population stabilisation are felicitously attuned through the medium of individual rational choice.

The ideological intentions of the *Statement* were made clear by a lightly-coded attack on the American new left. The Whitehouse policy response to population is advertised as 'measured, modulated', as opposed to 'an overreaction by some'. Overreaction (in response to imminent environmental crisis) was identified in 1984 as an unfortunate consequence of rapid population growth having coincided with two regrettable factors that 'hindered families and nations'. The first was foreign socialism; the second involved the counter-culture's alleged 'anti-intellectualism', attributed here to anxieties caused by the West's rapid modernisation. Cultural pessimism, rather than material concerns about sustainability, was thus identified as the source of

domestic population anxiety. This interpretation left the way clear for a 'rapid and responsible development of natural resources', that is, the sustained economic growth through technologically-enhanced development that revisionists and neoliberals associated with population growth. For the radical right, in sum, the problem of population growth simply evaporated since in the West it had been merely a delusion of left-wing infantilism, while in poorer countries the solution lay in liberalised markets whose congenial effects on fertility choices would be complemented by the efficiency of privatised health services.

Before leaving this category of population-scepticism it is important to notice how social conservatism was also incorporated. Once population growth had been discounted as a relevant issue it became easier for social conservatives to instigate changes that would not only undermine support for population policies but also direct funding away from family planning programmes. The defining issue here was abortion. While abortion had been viewed as an integral part of family planning by much of the population establishment, the Reagan administration's emphasis on human lives included the unborn whose rights coincided with its pro-life policy. Population policies must, the Whitehouse insisted, be 'consistent with respect for human dignity and family values', including religious values. Abortion was now scuttled into the category of disrespectful ('repugnant') coercion. 'Attempts to use abortion, involuntary sterilization, or other coercive measures in family planning', it stated, 'must be shunned' (The Whitehouse 1984, p. 578). This judgement was not merely rhetorical: it had immediate practical implications for family planning organisations, NGOs, the UNFPA itself, which now lost US funding even if they only in principle supported abortion.

By placing social and religious conservatism at the heart of American population policy, the Republicans gave succour to traditional antipathies to modern contraception and women's reproductive autonomy while introducing an additional level of value-conflict into a field where secular attitudes had formerly dominated. This opened a new dimension in the population-silencing frame. Asking why population growth now attracts so little attention in the United States, Martha Campbell cites 'anti-abortion activists, religious leaders and conservative think tanks' as a major cause (Campbell 2007, p. 240). As religious voices have become more strident in a context of multiculturalist respect for diversity and neo-conservative support, espousing population concerns that imply anti-natalism has correspondingly become more risky.

In conclusion, population-scepticism is espoused by experts who doubt that population growth remains problematic. Here I have merely suggested that complacency is unwarranted because of contingencies and uncertainties. But I have shown that scepticism also has a more political dimension inasmuch as it is reinforced by revisionist claims that population growth is advantageous: a view that is congruent with neoliberal desires for sustained economic growth and anathema to limits-to-growth arguments. It is evident that the Mexico City policy did represent a profound discursive shift regarding population trends, which were now interpreted through the lens of the American new right. To

some extent population policy was merely one among several vehicles for expressing this ideological turn, but the links between population growth, economics and sexual reproduction also rendered this a compelling area for exhibiting new right values at home and for instantiating them in the international arena.

Population-declinism

Population-declinism is a corollary of population-scepticism in that it is an expression of the final stage of demographic transition. It warrants its own discursive category, however, because it differs from scepticism in two significant ways: regarding mood and policy implications. Its affective tenor is quite different from the dynamic, pro-growth bullishness of political scepticism. A symptom of completing transition is that the population ages. This phenomenon engenders a sense of melancholia and loss connected to fears of relative decline; it is despondent about completing transition. Population-declinism is currently powerful in precluding enthusiasm for population stabilisation because rather than welcoming ageing as a sign that modernity's enormous demographic expansion is ending, it promulgates images of enervation and decay in which the faltering powers and risk-averse outlooks ascribed to older people are attributed to whole regions (like 'old Europe'). For declinists, low-fertility societies are destined to fail relative to more youthful, energetic competitors, with feebleness in the global economy accompanying weakness in the military theatre (Jackson and Howe 2008). The remedy is to encourage renewed growth.

Such anxieties induce a second distinction between declinism and scepticism. While the latter rejects state interference in influencing population numbers, regarding it as unnecessary, inefficacious and coercive, population-declinists do advocate interventionist policies. Unlike earlier limits-to-growth exponents, however, they promote pro-, rather than anti-, natalism, alongside immigration, in order to rejuvenate developed world populations (Commission of the European Communities 2005, Dixon and Margolis 2006). In 2009 almost half the governments in these countries regarded their population growth as too low (United Nations 2009). The populations of the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, *inter alia*, are all projected to increase substantially by 2050, through a mix of natural growth and net migration. Yet the power of declinism is such that this is rarely complemented by consideration of whether upward trends enhance quality of life or the environmental systems on which it depends (Coleman and Rowthorn 2011).

While policies to grow late-transitional populations are widely justified by ageing, demographic interventions actually seem unhelpful here. On the one hand, longer life expectancy inevitably entails more elderly people: a situation likely to persist worldwide as mortality declines. It need not be perceived in declinist terms but not doing so would require a radical change in current perceptions of older people and evaluations of the good life (Coole 2012a). On

the other, the rhythm of transition and its effects on the age profile also produce an acute, if shorter-lived, hiatus, especially where fertility declines rapidly. In this latter case, several decades of exceptionally but temporarily high dependency ratios ensue as the last high-fertility cohort ages (currently the case with post-war baby-boomers).

This age imbalance will even out as population levels stabilise. In addition to ideological antipathy to this latter scenario, however, the initial period of ageing does pose genuine, if short-term, challenges for policymakers, and this is what provokes declinists to advocate population growth. In particular, as the age bulge moves through the population a 'demographic dividend' of a large working-age group becomes a demographic deficit. As this spur to increased productivity passes, the dominant economic-growth framework implies policies to replenish the labour force. In practice, however, pronatalism is largely irrelevant because the situation will be easing by the time new citizens become productive. Immigration achieves faster economic impact but it is 'a fallacy that higher immigration counteracts population ageing' (Productivity Commission 2011, p. 5, United Nations 2000, House of Lords 2008). In the longer term, both these demographic solutions reproduce the difficulties they are intended to resolve. Because new bodies and migrants also age, ceaseless additions would be needed to service and replace larger elderly cohorts. Yet tackling challenges of more elderly people will only be exacerbated if populations expand and ecological services correspondingly deteriorate. The principal danger of declinism is that it operates within a short timeframe that focuses on temporary fiscal and productivity challenges, yet its demographic remedies are likely to aggravate unsustainability later on.

Population-decomposing

A fourth category of silencing discourse combines several normative and methodological trends that collectively decompose the concept of population into its constituent parts. Aggregated, the idea of a population provides a framework for considering overall size, growth rates and density; disaggregated, it is devolved into individuals or households. Since the mid-1980s, and for reasons not unrelated to the ideological shifts of the period, discussion of demographics has increasingly assumed this latter form. As a result, with the notable exception of DTT, the broad narratives that were previously used to problematise and politicise general demographic trends have largely disintegrated. The ramifications of population growth they dramatised and the heroic interventions they sanctioned have therefore atrophied, too. As a consequence, decomposing population has had the discursive effect of foreclosing the problematisation of population by deconstructing it. Talking about population as a totality that can be planned and managed has come to be regarded as not only politically dangerous but also methodologically crude. This is a more elusive discursive effect than the first three categories

but it has been effective in disenfranchising the population question in three ways: normative, methodological and ontological.

Normatively, population-decomposing has been effective in rejecting 'the numbers game'. This is congruent with population-shaming and political scepticism but this argument is rather different in its aversion to referencing population size as such. The numbers game is played by those who worry that the mass of human flesh is unsustainable or that thickening population densities degrade wellbeing. Iconic texts like Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* were explicit about population being a numbers game. In light of an imminent environmental crisis, Ehrlich (1972, preface) defined population control as 'the conscious regulation of the numbers of human beings to meet the needs not just of individual families, but of society as a whole'. In other words, reproduction was understood as an other-regarding act. Ehrlich (1972, p. 3f.) had concluded that 'no matter how you slice it, population is a numbers game'. He was probably referring here to the need for statistical familiarity with the properties of exponential growth, but to critics his work suggested an equation between the numbers game and state-imposed coercion. As a consequence the focus on population size and growth rates, especially when linked to targets and sanctions, fell into disrepute. This antipathy is encapsulated in UNFPA's observation that since the mid-1990s, there has been 'a shift in population policy and programmes away from a focus on human numbers' to a focus on 'human lives'. Policies based on perceptions of a 'race between numbers and resources' are eschewed as synonymous with a 'numbers game' presented as antithetical to human rights (UNFPA, n.d., p. 4, UNFPA 2008, p. 1). In sum, even to focus on overall demographic quantities becomes anathema to personal choice and liberty. Reproduction is recast as a self-regarding act.

One outcome has been to devolve population issues into matters of reproductive health and individual welfare entitlements. Of course, these measures are eminently worthy. But the change of emphasis they entail has helped to exclude discussions about overall numbers while supporting the view that population is best approached at an individual or familial level. At the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) (1994), this woman-centred perspective re-oriented the dominant population framework as legitimate demands by women dove-tailed with their antipathy to the population establishment. One outcome was to bolster population-decomposing and its disavowal of the numbers game, provoking critics like Ehrlich (2008, p. 107) to lament the way environmental repercussions of population growth now succumbed to 'a narrow focus on issues of reproductive rights and maternal and child health'. The focus is in no way reprehensible but it has had the effect of displacing population growth as a global environmental issue. Campbell (2007, pp. 237, 243) cites Cairo as 'the turning point in removing the population subject from policy discourse', noting that talking about population became politically incorrect thereafter because it was perceived as disadvantageous to women.

This decomposing trend has been reinforced by the way aggregated population numbers have come to be regarded as methodologically and statistically crude, thus further undermining the possibility of advancing (neo-) Malthusian arguments. Figures at a more fine-grained level make less obvious headline news or dramatic narratives. Complementing new emphasis on demographic complexity is a widespread view that population dynamics such as age composition or urbanisation are more relevant for policymaking than broader trajectories of population size. This, too, dissolves narrative impact by translating demographic trends into numerous policy challenges. These disaggregating effects thus serve to de-politicise and de-problematise the issue because as data has been refined, the demographic phenomena that mobilised players of the numbers game are occluded.

Demography as a discipline has itself, moreover, become more closely modelled on economics and concerned with economic data, thus sharing with economics its own movement away from macro-level approaches towards micro-level, statistical studies where individuals feature as rational agents making choices on the basis of cost–benefit analysis. Le Bras maintains that every branch of demographic analysis has been renewed in this direction over the past two decades. ‘In fertility studies, the dominant position is now occupied by microeconomic models of the family’ based on work by Gary Becker and George Schulz (Le Bras 2008, p. xi). Ehrlich also argues that as a discipline, demography ‘has largely diverged from environmental concerns and the broad analyses of social structures’ it formerly undertook. It now ‘focuses on measuring and modelling the dynamics of various populations’: a process judged valuable but peripheral to ‘the really big demographic issue’ of the environmental cost of population growth and its rectification (Ehrlich 2008, p. 103). It might also be noted that macro-level analysis was formerly associated with structural, Marxist approaches that have themselves fallen from grace as planning regimes have succumbed to more laissez-faire frameworks emphasising individual decision-making. In sum, the normative and methodological dimensions of population-decomposing together help to demolish the framework in which population numbers matter and in which society has an interest in and responsibility for sustainable levels. This makes it difficult to identify, problematise or debate population growth as a social issue amenable to democratic debate or collective action.

A third component of population-decomposing is more ontological, yet it, too, plays its part in deconstructing population: in this case by de-materialising it. As advanced countries have developed service or digital economies, and as the more obviously material costs of industrialisation have become less emphasised, so attention to the material needs and costs of more bodies, *qua* needy biological entities engaged in physical labour, has also waned. Diane Coyle (1997) writes evocatively of a ‘weightless world’ and urges governments to embrace an age of de-materialisation. This complements a tendency to understand social systems in virtual terms, with production and consumption re-figured as virtual flows of data, symbols and images that can be regarded as

having little actual impact on the environment. Yet a corresponding emphasis on the human capital that drives the knowledge economy detracts from the space that embodied humans require and ignores the consumer durables – like cars, refrigerators, plastics, swimming pools – they desire. It permits an illicit substitution of the idea of sustained, indefinite growth for earlier recognition of the material limits of a finite planet. From a virtual viewpoint there is in this lightness of being no obvious limit to the numbers the earth can sustain or to their capacity to invent new technologies that will render resources infinitely elastic and felicitously ethereal. This surely rests on a dangerous illusion.

Population-fatalism

In a final discursive category, the term population-fatalism captures some contemporary British inquiries into challenges posed by population growth. Because these are testimony to renewed concern about expanding numbers, they are suggestive of a return of the population question. They are nonetheless distinctive precisely because their overall tone is *not* fatalistic: they are mainly confident that the challenges of 9 billion (70 million in the United Kingdom) can be met. But they are fatalist in treating population growth as a given; as an aggravating or critical factor they are powerless to change and reluctant to address. Instead, they identify challenges and calculate abatement costs. This distinguishes their arguments from: population-scepticism, which does not see population growth as a problem; population-declinism, which encourages population growth to foreclose shrinkage; population-decomposing, which disavows the very framework of numbers. But it shares their antipathy to anti-natalist policy and is probably apprehensive about population-shaming.

The Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change is a good example of population-fatalism. Although population growth is included as a significant contributor to global warming there is no suggestion that a demographic element might be incorporated into climate change policy (Stern 2006, p. 12). This formula of neglectful concern has been the hallmark of other recent studies, which prefer technological solutions to controversial political interventions. The UK government's Foresight Programme has produced two recent reports in this genre. *Land Futures – Making the Most of Land in the C21st* (Foresight 2010) links population growth in the United Kingdom to pressures on the land, biodiversity, carbon sinks, urban green spaces and water that may badly erode wellbeing. *The Future of Food and Farming: Challenges and Choices for Global Sustainability* cites population growth as an urgent challenge in light of the need 'to ensure that a global population rising to nine billion or more can be fed sustainably and equitably' (Foresight 2011, introduction, p. 9). But in neither case is there any suggestion that further population growth might be tackled. *The Economist's* (2011) 'The 9 billion-people question' and the Institution of Mechanical Engineers' 'Population: One Planet, Too Many People?' (2011) follow a similar logic, with (bio)technological solutions being proffered for a demographic fait accompli.

The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution's *The Environmental Impacts of Demographic Change in the UK* (2011) goes further by explicitly excluding population growth as an appropriate policy domain (Coole 2012b). Despite acknowledging that 'total population is likely to continue to grow, at a historically relatively high rate' in the United Kingdom and that some regions suffer 'obvious pressure on infrastructure, services and environment' (RCEP 2011, 2.22, 6.2), the report constructs an either/or choice between seeking to influence demographic change or trying to mitigate its environmental impact. It unequivocally opts for the latter, declaring the former not 'a good basis for policy' because unspecified 'objections on social and ethical grounds would outweigh the environmental gains' (RCEP 2011, 6.7, 6.8, 6.9). Limits, furthermore, are dismissed as unmeasurable value judgements about wellbeing, as opposed to more flexible, costed restraints (RCEP 2011, 4.2–4.9). Yet is it not precisely regarding these normative dimensions that informed public deliberation would be salutary?

In this regard, the Royal Society's *People and the Planet* (2012) is unusually non-fatalistic. It advertises the efficacy of public policy and foreign aid in pursuing the UN's projected low-growth variant, especially regarding unmet contraceptive need: 'global population growth needs to be slowed and stabilised' and actual numbers will 'depend heavily on the population policies for the next few years'. It heeds the interactions between consumption, demographic change and environmental impact, recommending that the 'most developed and the emerging economies must stabilise and then reduce material consumption'. It accordingly challenges the economic drivers of population growth by calling for the development of socio-economic systems and institutions that 'are not dependent on continued material consumption growth', while reintroducing a discourse of finitude, scarcity and limits that acknowledges a declining population can lessen pressure on natural resources (Royal Society 2012, pp. 4, 5, 6, 15n.1, 43, 45). *People and the Planet* perhaps signals a paradigm shift, since similar arguments are advanced in UNEP's *Global Environmental Assessment – 5* (2012), published in advance of the Rio + 20 conference. It, too, identifies population and economic growth as the principal drivers of a worsening environmental crisis that calls for radically altered 'mindsets' if global ecosystems are to become sustainable.

Conclusion

I have asked why, as the twenty-first century proceeds inexorably towards a world population of 9 billion plus, there is so little discussion of the socio-ecologically deleterious effects of continuing population growth. I identified five discourses that together explain why there is currently no politically acceptable framework within which population numbers can be problematised or remedial action commended. While they are mutually-supporting in their silencing effects, two of these discourses seem especially powerful: population-shaming, because it renders the population question so morally treacherous,

and population-scepticism, because of its complacency and its congeniality for hegemonic pro-growth ideologies. I have not attempted to refute such arguments but I have suggested that they are not good enough reasons for suppressing discussion about population numbers and the merits of fewer people, especially as renewed public concerns emerge over resource insecurity, biodiversity, climate change and high-density urban living. Until the ghosts of the past have been exorcised, however, it seems unlikely that population growth will regain its place as an integral component of the overall sustainability puzzle.

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