



# The Neo-Malthusian Reflex in Climate Politics: Technocratic, Right Wing and Feminist References

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## ABSTRACT

A neo-Malthusian reflex can be observed in the climate debate: statistical calculations link climate change to world population growth and suggest strategies for birth control. The undead neo-Malthusian ghost is being revived, with its reference to the category of ‘population’ and its colonial-racist and social-Darwinist legacies. This article discusses this dangerous development, paying particular but not exclusive attention to German constellations, showing that the actors who strengthen this narrative range from ecological mainstream positions to those right-wing forces who do not deny climate change. However, some climate activist and feminist positions have also contributed by advocating a birth strike as a strategy for containing climate change. The article analyses three dimensions of neo-Malthusianism: the abstract statistical construction of an excess population; the historically deeply rooted racist and classist attribution of this excess to ‘others’; and the totalitarian visions of global ‘fertility’ management. The argument is that even if the racist and classist attributions are not directly addressed by the more progressive political actors, the three dimensions of neo-Malthusianism strongly flow together and reinforce each other. In conclusion, the text takes up anti-Malthusian feminist perspectives which place a special emphasis on the concept of reproductive justice.

## KEYWORDS

climate change; reproductive justice; fertility; population control; racism; demography; malthusianism

*“I think the only thing scarier than a far-right, racist movement that denies the reality of climate change is a far-right, racist movement that doesn’t deny the reality of climate change.” (Klein 2019a)*

*“Having spent the last six months in a process of reflection, we have come to realise that Birth-Strike is no longer tenable as a campaign tool for action on the climate crisis [...] We have to concede that we underestimated the power of ‘overpopulation’ as a growing form of climate breakdown denial - even in some of our most revered scientists and fellow climate activists.” (BirthStrike 2020)*

*“Documented here are a variety of coercive practices [...]. The results argue strongly for an end to family planning approaches that instrumentalize women’s reproductive capacity in the pursuit of external social goals and to target-driven contraceptive programs [...].” (Senderowicz 2019, 8)*

A neo-Malthusian reflex can be observed in the climate change debate. There is again a revival of concerns based on statistical calculations which are suggesting that climate change is caused or reinforced by world population growth. On the basis of this narrative anti-natalist strategies for birth control are presented as the solution.<sup>1</sup> Very different political actors are currently engaging in this rationality and agenda, and this is a dangerous development. Undead ghosts are revived in the shape of the category of 'population'<sup>2</sup> and the idea of 'too high' birth rates, and technocratic fantasies are then proposed as ways of dealing with this. These ghosts are inseparably entangled with their colonial-racist and social-Darwinist<sup>3</sup> history.

In order to reflect this neo-Malthusian ghosts' revival, I will do the following in three steps:

First, I will show the different contexts and circles in which these patterns of argumentation are currently being revived. I will do so by looking, from my situated perspective, at transnational but also local discursive developments within Germany.

This starts with the usual suspects of the population establishment,<sup>4</sup> who present family planning in the Global South as a 'climate-efficient' measure on the basis of highly reductive statistical messages within a rather technocratic ecological perspective. However, this statistical rationality is, as I will argue, also a point of reference for biopolitical right wing forces and – although in very different ways – climate activists such as the BirthStrike movement and post-humanist feminist considerations.

In the next section, I will distinguish three dimensions of this thinking in the category of 'population' – three different dimensions which are nevertheless connected within one overarching rationality.<sup>5</sup> The aim here is to question which commonalities and differences are crucial in these very different neo-Malthusian attachments to the 'population problem' as relevant to the climate. First, I will show which patterns of thinking are promoted by all parties involved when the idea of a destructive Anthropocene is used to substantiate the abstract assertion of a statistical excess of human population. Secondly, I will point to the historically deeply rooted racist and social-Darwinist attributions of this excess to 'others' – to those who (in the future) are not supposed to live or reproduce. And thirdly, I will discuss the totalitarian planning vision of a 'fertility' that is assumed to be manageable at a global level.

In the concluding section, I will shift the focus to a long but partially forgotten or marginalised historical critique of this neo-Malthusian reflex. I also want to discuss how the population/climate change nexus can be radically countered from a reproductive justice perspective, with reference to lessons learned with respect to global necropolitics in the Covid 19 pandemic.

Before proceeding, I would like to situate my research perspective. The background of this analysis is a long term research on the transnational history of (post)colonial anti-natalist population programmes on the one hand (Schultz 2006; Bendix and Schultz 2018). It is also based on the study of demographisation trends in Germany. This involves research on the recent history of a highly class-selective pronatalist family policy that has been established in Germany since the 2000s, and also on utilitarian policy rationales within the German migration regime (e.g. Schultz 2015, 2019b). In short, the term demographisation means the re/interpretation of social crises as demographic ones and the application of solutions to demographic variables.

For the following contribution, I take from this research a state-critical perspective on the relationship between knowledge production and power relations, shaped by Foucault's (1991) concept of biopolitics, and therefore speak of rationalities. The concept of demographisation builds on this and thus makes it possible to examine the articulation of demographic problematisation and population policy strategies (Schultz 2015; Murphy 2017; McCann 2017; Hummel 2000). Furthermore, for a radical critique of biopolitical power relations, I draw on anti-racist and anti-eugenic feminist analyses such as those that converge in the Black Feminism's concept of reproductive justice (Ross 2017). This intersectional concept asks whose 'reproduction' is considered valuable within the framework of economic, security, or, in the case discussed here, ecological rationalities, and whose is considered negligible or even harmful and thus to be prevented. And it carries with it the painful knowledge of violent and discriminatory practices which have accompanied and continue to accompany these bio- or necropolitical agendas (Schultz 2006; Wilson 2017; Murphy 2017).

### **The Neo-Malthusian Revival and Climate Change: Heterogeneous Actors and Contexts**

The political contexts in which neo-Malthusian narratives linked to climate change are currently circulating are diverse or even antagonistic. This is not as astonishing as it might seem. Interpreting the size and the composition of 'population' as a variable for political intervention makes it possible to link it to a wide range of crisis diagnosis; this range is as wide as social problems themselves. 'Population' has long served as a passe-partout for a specific way of addressing national or global problems, arbitrary statistically linking them to the quantity of (future) humans and presenting reproductive policies as the solution (Bhatia et al. 2020; Heim and Schaz 1996). The history of the population establishment constituted after World War II itself shows that references to 'population' ranged from strategies for opposing communist and anticolonial forces, for fighting against poverty and for national development, to military and security rationalities, and to strategies of investing in a better status for women, and also, since the 1960s to strategies of containing global environmental destruction (Hartmann 1995; Schultz 2006).

### ***Recalling Reductive Statistical Knowledge Archives***

It is therefore hardly surprising that the transnational neo-Malthusian knowledge elite, which has been firmly anchored in the think tanks, institutions and networks of the population establishment for decades, is currently once again making its voice heard in the debate on climate change and is now re-injecting it with regard to climate change (Sasser 2018). 'The population bomb is back, with a global warming twist', feminist researchers and activists Hartmann and Barajas-Roman (2009) warned already in the run-up to the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference. Paul Ehrlich, the author of the book 'Population Bomb' as one of the most frequently quoted colonial-racist works of the population establishment from the 1960s, had once again, together with Anne Ehrlich, spoken out in this context.<sup>6</sup> Hartmann and Barajas-Román also referred to a study by Oregon State University that was circulating widely at that time and is typical

of the population establishment's thinking: the study calculated as 'carbon legacy' the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions a woman was responsible for when she gave birth to a child, extrapolating this not only for her children but also for her grandchildren. Equally typical of the population establishment's docking on to climate change was another study promoted at that time by the Optimum Population Trust, in which family planning as the most 'cost-effective' investment against climate change was mathematically compared with the costs of alternative technologies and found to be cheaper (Wire 2009).

Since then, the thesis of population growth as a central 'factor' in climate change has become internationally solidified. In 2017, more than 15,000 scientists reinforced the neo-Malthusian revival with a 'Warning to Humanity' (Ripple et al. 2017). They declared 'continued rapid population growth' to be the 'primary driver behind many ecological and even societal threats' (1026). The highest internationally established body on climate change, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, also declared in its 2014 report that: 'Globally, economic and population growth continued to be the most important drivers of increases in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from fossil fuel combustion.' (IPCC 2014, 5) In contrast, the UN World Population Fund, which is responsible for population policy implementation at the UN level, acts somewhat more cautiously. This may be seen as a sign that an oversimplified neo-Malthusian narrative on climate change is fortunately still contested despite the widespread use of simplistic formulae. The UN Fund does link its anti-natalist programmes in the Global South to climate change, but it does so differently and more indirectly. The thesis here, which is of course also sweeping and problematic, is that access to family planning results in lower birth rates which strengthen the 'resilience' of those social groups that are particularly affected by climate change (UNFPA 2016).

Looking at the example of German public science communication neo-Malthusian population policy narratives are deeply anchored in the knowledge archives of a conservative and technocratic environmental policy mainstream, and they can easily be revived. Reference can be made, for example, to the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth*, which was also widely read in Germany, with its catastrophic statements on global population growth (Meadows et al. 1972). The ecological catastrophism which used images such as 'cancer cells' or 'floods' in order to describe the damaging effect of population growth in the Global South was still typical up to the time of the UN World Population Conference in Cairo 1994 (ICPD), but lost influence after the ICPD with its more post-catastrophic, multi-causal and liberal feminist frames and wordings (Schultz 2006). However, this trope of the world population as uncontrollably growing 'cancer cells' reappeared in 2014 in an introduction to a publication which was supported by the renowned eco-institutes Wuppertal Institute and Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (Gesang 2014, 13). Another example of the reappearance of such ecological alarmism was an article in the conservative daily newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 2018, where the author called for 'breaking a taboo'. He declared, '[r]apid population growth is one of the big drivers of climate change' (Müller-Jung 2018). In doing so, he referred to a study published in the journal *Science* in 2018 by, among others, a grey eminence of the population establishment, John Bongaarts, who once again presented new calculations on the climate policy cost-effectiveness of family planning (Bongaarts and O'Neill 2018). However, a neo-Malthusian march through the German mainstream media cannot be observed at the moment; the terrain remains contested, and there is also sometimes

resistance to too simplistic linkages. For example, a report in the Berlin daily newspaper *Tagesspiegel* on 'Climate change and population growth' discussed extreme global inequality by referring to national per capita averages: 'One US American causes as much CO<sub>2</sub> as 581 Burundians.'<sup>7</sup> (Ehlerding 2019) Also, in 2019 the weekly magazine *Spiegel*, which usually endorses neo-Malthusian catastrophism, reminded its readers that current UN forecasts no longer assume continuous, let alone exponential, future population growth, but rather a levelling off and then stagnation of global population figures (Stöcker 2019).

Overall, however, such counter-statistics do not make much difference. The neo-Malthusian self-assurance is too deeply anchored in the scientific and everyday mind with respect to a variety of linkages. Recently, for example, national economic growth crises in the Global South, which are currently the favourite topic in development policy under the keyword 'demographic dividend' (Bendix and Schultz 2018; Hendrixson and Hartmann 2019), have again been presented as population problems. On other occasions the development narrative has linked national population size to unemployment, lack of health care, 'unstable' political conditions, or migration. In this climate of a revival of endless statistical associations with the variable 'population', the climate change factor can simply be added to the list.

At present, the general neo-Malthusian construction of 'overpopulation' is concentrated primarily on the African continent. In traditional colonial-racist fashion, there is currently a broad media and political offensive in Germany that applies the old neo-Malthusian narrative indiscriminately and sweepingly to the whole continent. This ranges from the racist imagination of the development policy spokesperson of the party Die Linke (Schultz 2019a), to pamphlets on the African 'population explosion', an idea that has even been adopted by left-liberals (Smith 2019; Brachet 2020), to the expert reports of the private think tank Berlin Institute for Population and Development (BIPD 2020).<sup>8</sup>

### **A Welcome Reference Point for Right Wing Biopolitics**

For the extreme right, at least in Germany, the focus of biopolitical conjurations is less on climate change than on the classic reference topics of migration and security. For example, the right-wing magazine *Cicero* has proposed '[f]ewer births for less radicalisation' as the 'most sustainable solution' against terrorist attacks (Marguier 2016). The party programme of the right-wing party 'Alternative für Deutschland (AfD 2016)' which has been represented since 2017 in the German Parliament (Bundestag) and has gained more than a quarter of the votes in some Federal States (Bundesländer), claims that 'the population growth in Africa' results in 'a huge migratory pressure'. Generally the far right in Germany is not engaging with but denying climate change. But there are signs that some groups might start to abandon the position of climate denial and embrace the issue of climate change precisely because of neo-Malthusian enticements.

First of all there are some rather pragmatic suggestions. This possibility was considered, for example, by journalist Posener (2019) in the conservative daily newspaper *Die Welt*. He claimed that 'man-made climate change' is 'driven by overpopulation, especially in Africa' and asked: 'Why does the AfD not take up this issue?' After all, as he continued, it was 'compatible with their xenophobia'. A sign that this change of course was being considered was the call by the Berlin AfD youth in 2019 for their

party to abandon climate denial and instead call for a global one-child policy in newly industrialised countries (Fiedler and Kieser 2019).

However, suggestions that it might be worth abandoning climate denial are not only based on pragmatic considerations related to gaining votes in times of climate activism, especially among the younger generation. After all, the population discourse is the central narrative anchor of the right. The German right is known to combine *völkisch* thinking, anti-feminism and racism with tropes such as '*Umvolkung*', '*Volkstod*' or '*Bevölkerungsaustausch*' (see Botsch and Kopke 2018).<sup>9</sup> These tropes are rooted in the German right-wing archives of *völkisch* Nazi traditions but also connect to the European neoracist, anti-Muslim new right. For example, the concept of '*Bevölkerungsaustausch*' refers to the concept of the 'great replacement' introduced by French Front National intellectual supporter Reneaud Camus, and is important within a common European reference system of groups like the Identitarian movement in Germany (Kellershohn 2017).

How dangerous these biopolitical climate politics of the right wing are has become very clear in view of eco-fascist terrorist activities where the neo-Malthusian narrative of climate change is already deeply rooted and connected to an anti-immigration, militarist and racist world view. For example, the El Paso murderer who killed 22 people and injured more than 20 in 2019 in a Walmart store as a way of fighting against the 'Hispanic invasion' explained that getting 'rid of enough people' would make 'our way of life' more 'sustainable'. He referred to the Christchurch murderer, who had called himself an 'eco-fascist' and had explained that 'there is no nationalism without environmentalism' (Darby 2019). The warning of the climate change expert and journalist Klein (2019a) is pertinent: 'I think the only thing scarier than a far-right, racist movement that denies the reality of climate change is a far-right, racist movement that doesn't deny the reality of climate change.'

### ***Feminist and Climate Activist Birth Strike***

However, there are also some recent cases in which the neo-Malthusian grand narrative has been linked to a different, politically diametrically opposed, feminist and climate activist side.<sup>10</sup> Here the focus is not on the Global South; rather, these proponents develop the position that they themselves should give up having children in the Global North in order to do something about climate change.

In conversations with some German climate activists it becomes clear that various things are mixed up in this unease about having children.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, there is the uncertainty as to whether children should be born into a threatening future at all. On the other hand, feminist positions are taken against a pronatalism that is quite ubiquitous for white German middle-class people. Another central aspect, however, is a conflation of having children with a policy of individual consumerism: climate activists ask themselves whether it is not irresponsible to bring children into the world as people responsible for future CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

This unease was also promoted and articulated by the feminist British singer Blythe Pepino with her campaign 'BirthStrike' (Hunt 2019). Pepino declared that she would not have a child in order to protect the global climate, and organised a network of like-minded people. The campaign received enormous international media attention (Hunt 2019; Haas 2019). Likewise in Germany, the feminist author Brunschweiler (2019)

called for a birth strike in her book *Kinderfrei statt kinderlos*.<sup>12</sup> BirthStrike and Brunschweiler both referred to a study by Wynes and Nicholas (2017), which compares extrapolated future CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from children and grandchildren with, for example, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from air travel.<sup>13</sup> Neo-Malthusian lobby organisations such as the British based Population Matters (2019) accordingly celebrated this campaign as a breakthrough for their cause. The BirthStrike campaigners themselves tried to distance themselves from this explicitly neo-Malthusian engulfment of their ideas. However, in 2020 they had to admit that their campaign had evoked exactly this narrative and had become famous at a transnational level precisely because of these effects of their use of statistics messages and arguments (Monbiot 2020; BirthStrike 2020, see quote above).

Similarly, the feminist posthumanist theorist Donna Haraway has promoted the link between world population and climate change in her latest publications. With her call to 'make kin not babies', she mixes her very laudable feminist call for making kinship instead of relating to the bio-genetical family with a call to drastically reduce the global population numbers. She makes the drastic proposal that the current population of 7 billion should be reduced to 2–3 billion, and presents this as an alternative to the future 11 billion humans which, at the time of her publications, the highly speculative UN population projection models were calculating would be reached by 2100 (Haraway 2015, 2018, 74; Strathern et al. 2019, 171).<sup>14</sup> Similarly to BirthStrike, Haraway distances herself from the colonial-racist implications of birth control policies in the Global South, and she too explains that the call to refrain from childbearing is not directed to the 'others' but to a (however not clearly situated) feminist we. This leaves some of the 'others' out of her non-natalist project. However, the message has an ambiguous undertone: in the optimistic speculative fictional settings, she suggests on the one hand that 'persons belonging to groups subjected to genocide' should have the right to have (more) children (Haraway 2018, 75). On the other hand, it seems as if she somehow attributes to those who have (more) children a lower moral status when she imagines that in her speculative better world 'new children must be rare and precious' (Haraway 2016, 138).

Haraway (2018, 68–69) says that these number games relate not only to humans but also to 'multispecies environmental and reproductive justice', and suggests that her speculative knowledge production strategy is to investigate and rework the concept of 'population' instead of avoiding it (Haraway 2016). However, she does not offer a convincing argument as to why she insists on resorting to the highly aggregated, not situated and disconnected, purely statistical quantity of humans constituted by 'population', or and why she uses typical neo-Malthusian language – for example, when she speaks of the 'pressure of human numbers on earth' (136). These statistical demographic tropes are absolutely the opposite of her general project of engagement for a situated, contingent and relational knowledge production which understands entangled relations of production and reproduction within a specific environment, historical constellation and social setting. Her call for a very diffuse version of demography 'that asks about numbers-in-worlds from non-Malthusian foundations' (Strathern et al., 170) fails to see that demographic rationalities inherently have a disentangling and reductive effect, as I will argue below.

Unlike Pepino, Haraway did not react to the many warning feminist voices that asked her to stop this dangerous game with world population numbers (for example Lewis



2017; Sasser and Murphy in Strathern et al. 2019). To the contrary, Haraway insists on her mission as a taboo breaker and says that her critics' responses are 'akin to the denials of climate change by some deeply believing US Christians' (Haraway 2018, 87; Strathern et al. 2019, 169–70).

### **The Population Variable: Three Entangled and Dangerous Dimensions**

In what sense are the political narratives on climate change and population presented above similar, and how do they differ? Certainly, the latter feminist and climate activist positions cannot be accused of pursuing colonial-racist and social-Darwinist intentions. Nevertheless, attaching to the discourse of 'population' is not innocent, but it is in many ways embedded in corresponding rationalities and narratives that are also reinforced when the world population-climate change link is promoted even without an explicit anti-natalist programme related to the Global South. Michelle Murphy (2017, 135), drawing on her research on national economics and population statistics, rightly argues that the concept of population cannot be separated from racism as its 'grammar' and its 'ghost'. I will similarly argue in the following that strategies of demographisation, translating social crises and conflicts into questions of 'population', are in many respects incompatible with emancipatory political projects oriented towards social transformation and against global relations of domination, capitalist predation and social inequality (Heim and Schaz 1996; Hummel 2000; Schultz 2015; Wilson 2017; Sasser 2018; Bhatia et al. 2020).

Crucially, three dimensions of neo-Malthusian problematisation that I will now elaborate on relate to each other: first, abstract number games within which 'population' is constructed as an isolable quantitative variable and placed in statistical relation to resource consumption or climate change, as all the political positions mentioned do; secondly, the projection of a current or future 'excess' of population onto 'others', which the presented feminist and climate activist positions more or less clearly reject; and thirdly, totalitarian visions of the possibility of global or national population control, as such problematisations suggest in principle though in very different ways.

### ***'Population' as a Statistical Apology for the Status quo***

Before starting the argument I would like to insert a disclaimer about the general question of valuable and necessary statistical knowledge production. Of course, we cannot do without statistical data in our social research analyses. However, first of all it is important to reflect on the scope of the explanatory power of data, the conditions in which they are produced, and the reifying effects they entail (Murphy 2017). Apart from that, my concern here is more specific: it is focused on the question of which rationalities and agendas are promoted when statistical calculations are resolved in such a way that 'population' becomes the main political variable and factor to be governed.

In principle, 'population' can only be spoken of as a crisis factor if we engage in a statistical production of knowledge that abstracts from social relations and relationships as well as from situated knowledge about socio-ecological contexts. One important effect of demographisation is that we do not talk about complex and changeable re/production relations, consumption relations, distribution relations or societal natural relations, but



about isolable statistical variables which, after being isolated from each other, can be linked mathematically as factors. 'Population' thus becomes an interchangeable abstract variable, just like other factors such as resources, jobs or CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, which can be used as a biopolitical starting point to influence other factors in an equation (Hynes 1993). A basic condition for demographic crisis narratives is therefore that the factor 'population' can only be calculated if the other factors, and thus the social conditions, are set as stable, or projected into the future as unchangeable – for example, if a certain stable future CO<sub>2</sub> emission per capita is included in the calculation. By correlating crisis phenomena statistically with the number of people, by attaching them statistically to the body, so to speak, a tautological rationality emerges that can also be described as an apology for the status quo (Harvey 2001). This dangerous tautology was summed up in the old anti-Neomalthusian slogan, which says that in the politics of population control the fight against poverty is equated with the fight against the poor. Given these basic premises, it is already clear that demographising social narratives of crisis explicitly serves right-wing and conservative ideas, even without directly serving colonial-racist or social-Darwinist narratives.

For the climate change debate, several dangerous implications of this biopolitical translation of social relations into demographic factors should be noted:

First of all, the idea of a world population as an isolable crisis variable corresponds to talking about the 'Anthropocene' (Ojeda, Sasser, and Lunstrum 2020). Ojeda et al. have shown that the concept of the Anthropocene needs to be questioned because of its ahistorical, depoliticizing, technocratic and undifferentiating perspectives. Basically the concept suggests that humanity as a whole has to be undifferentiatedly interpreted as a destructive factor. Humanity is thereby located outside of 'nature' and social power relations and the extremely unequal access to resources is ignored. Reference should be made here to the critique of the Anthropocene concept using counter-concepts such as the 'racial capitalocene' or the 'plantationocene', which do not refer to an abstract humanity but rather place the history of colonialism and the capitalist world system at the centre of the crisis narratives (Ojeda, Sasser, and Lunstrum 2020). Interestingly enough, Haraway (2015) has also helped to spread these concepts, which makes her commitment to neo-Malthusian taboo-breaking all the more incomprehensible. The focus on the historical development of destructive societal-nature relations based on violence and extreme inequality raises fundamentally different current political questions than the focus on a quantity of people to be reduced. These concepts even inversely point to the lasting connection of the history of ecological destruction with the history of genocide, displacement and dispossession. Moreover, the Anthropocene idea of humans as a destructive factor excludes the possibilities and utopias of other, less destructive social relations with nature or other socioecological modes of production.

Furthermore, it is central to the aforementioned statistical rationality that it makes it seem arbitrary for a policy against climate change whether it is the existence or non-existence of people, or consumption patterns, or production processes that should be addressed: all these ways of intervention are interchangeable in these mathematical models. Basically, this undermines a democratic principle, namely, to search for solutions for all people who are now unquestionably here – a principle that should exclude the highly dangerous necropolitical implications of approaches which question the (future) existence or non-existence of people.

Finally, the other side of the coin of the statistical effect of totalisation with recourse to an abstract humanity is the effect of the statistical individualisation of problem descriptions. The latter effect is also expressed in statistical calculations of the effects of consumption – for example, when the individual ecological footprint or individual CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are calculated (Wynes and Nicholas 2017). Such calculations have depoliticising and dehistoricising effects too when they become the central political starting point and are not included in critical analyses of the imperial way of life or in the collective search for alternative ways of living and solidarity-based economies (Brand and Wissen 2021). As isolated information they are no more than a prolongation of those statistical models emanating from data about the status quo and translated into individualised data.

### ***The neo-Malthusian Gateway: Calculating with the Prevention of the Existence of 'Others'***

The second typical operation of neo-Malthusianism is the attribution of the abstractly calculated quantitative excess population to the 'others'. In the following I will argue that this operation is both: On the one hand it is a discursive break based on the fact that neo-Malthusians do not need to argue when referring to the deeply rooted 'evidence' of post/colonial and racist imaginaries. On the other hand, however, this operation also involves statistical rationalities in order to legitimize this externalization of 'overpopulation'.

Until today, the talk about problematic population dynamics immediately conjures up images of non-white crowds in the Global South and of brown or black female bodies conceived as non-self-determined, non-responsible and reproducing excessively, rather than images of white male top managers or elites whose sterilisation might be evoked as a sensible 'solution' (an equally absurd imagination, of course) (Wilson 2017; Hendrixson and Hartmann 2019). These colonially racist and sexist imaginaries of othering which are presented as self-evident have been consolidated over decades of international population establishment programmes and are deeply rooted in global notions of development assistance. And they continue to be bluntly circulated by the corresponding think tanks, for example when they refer to the 'youth bulge' (Angenendt and Popp 2013). Entire generations of young people, especially young men in African countries, are declared a threat to peace and political stability and the classic racist stigma of criminalisation is projected onto 'other' men (Wilson 2017). Likewise, women in the Global South continue to be presented as lacking self-determination and requiring protection for their own good.

However there are also several 'rational' statistical operations legitimizing this dimension of neo-Malthusian othering which are very closely linked to the first dimension explained in the last subchapter. One operation which is very prominent for the current era of population discourse is the focus on national age structures. The argument here goes that 'aging' or 'shrinking' nations in the Global North need higher fertility rates in order to achieve a more balanced age structure. In contrast, in the Global South fertility has to be curbed in order to benefit from the already mentioned 'demographic dividend'. Or put in another way: the recent focus on age structures within population policies helps introducing a 'neutral' criterion for legitimizing who should reproduce and who should not on a global level (Bendix and Schultz 2018).

Another operation of neo-Malthusian othering becomes even true when the pure facts of already mentioned enormous national differences between individual CO<sub>2</sub> per capita emissions are at stake. Only pointing to such statistical evidence of inequality is not opposing neo-Malthusian rationalities because this has always been built into them. This is not only evident in the origin story, namely Thomas W. Malthus' opposition to the poor relief measures of the eighteenth century, but also accompanies the development policies of the last decades. After all, the neo-Malthusian reflex consists precisely in declaring that those population groups excluded from resource consumption to represent the calculated 'overpopulation' and makes them a target. Beyond the genealogy of colonial-racist and social-Darwinist narratives, this is also anchored in the framework of the statistical logics themselves and is arithmetically quite rational. A classic line of argumentation of the population establishment, for example, is the following: While in the Global North there are ways of limiting climate change by reducing levels of consumption, this is not possible in the Global South. Here, in purely arithmetical terms, the decisive lever for achieving quantitative effects is the number of people. This statistical effect is even more potentiated when not only current data, such as the per capita ecological footprint, is used for calculations, but also when the claims of the addressed populations to be included in the fossil imperial lifestyle are speculatively taken into account. The violent inherent logic of population discourse becomes clear once again: as soon as future human existence or non-existence, or births to be prevented, become an ecological or economic calculating factor and the question of who should live and who should not is posed, it is perfectly coherent, within this framework of demographic rationality, to focus on ecologically or economically marginalised populations.

Certainly, the emancipatory approaches mentioned that dock onto the population discourse today do not explicitly support the projection of 'overpopulation' onto the 'others'. Nevertheless, these approaches are still mobilizing exactly this brutality and indifference of statistical operations even while sticking to the abstract population discourse. They simply cannot separate 'population' from these social-Darwinist and racist rationalities, even when they reject the imaginary racist dimensions that determine the history of population control anyway.

### ***'Fertility' and 'Reproductive Behaviour': Globalised Visions of Feasibility***

The recourse to the abstract statistical operations of 'population' is also not innocent for a third reason. The idea of an abstract 'excess' population is linked strongly to the assumption that it is at all feasibly to manage and govern a projected 'better' development of population numbers worldwide. The following subsection first looks briefly at the normative and coercive practices of managing fertility rates in the Global South as consequence of this assumption. However, the main focus will then be on this vision of feasibility itself.

The ongoing target of curbing population growth strongly influences how current population programmes in the Global South are institutionalised. There is an antinatalist bias in the way family planning and reproductive health programmes have been established. On the one hand there are very normative ways of framing a 'responsible' exercise of reproductive rights. A very specific way to plan, space and reduce fertility is promoted as the only model of female empowerment and self-determination (Schultz 2006). On the

other hand, the inbuilt targets of lowering fertility rates and increasing contraceptive prevalence rates lead to various forms of coercive practices (Senderowicz 2019). Currently, one important example is the revival of isolated family planning programmes based on cooperation between the population establishment, the Gates Foundation and the pharmaceutical industry. Within these programmes long-term contraceptive hormone implants are being massively pushed, especially in rural regions of many African countries (Wilson 2017; Bendix and Schultz 2018; Bendix et al. 2020). These implants not only involve problematic side effects, but are technologies that inherently disempower the users because their hormonal effects last for several years and users are dependent on medical services for their removal which are often not accessible or even denied (Britton et al. 2021).

All these disempowering or even violent practices are the effects of a programmatic focus on 'population' which starts from the idea that this 'variable' can, in principle, be influenced by social engineering. Identifying 'population' as a factor for curbing climate change implies that having children must be isolable and governable in socio-technological terms. And it implies ignoring the fact that having children is a central dimension of the social which involves complex and situated relations of care and reproduction and diverse heterogeneous ways of living together worldwide. Rather, the starting point is an equally individualising and quantifying view of 'fertility', 'birth rates' or, in the language of development policy, 'contraceptive prevalence rates' or 'couple protection years'. Among the central aspects of demographic knowledge production are thus, on the one hand, technological or logistical questions around contraceptive or sterilisation methods and their dissemination and, on the other hand, behaviourist approaches to explaining and quantifying individual 'reproductive behaviour' (Heitzmann 2017; McCann 2017). Moreover, according to sexist attributions, both aspects are generally based on the bodies and behaviour of women, which are thought to be reproductive – not those of men. Talking about 'population' is in this sense connected to grasping childbearing as an individual behaviour of women (or at best of 'couples') and looking for factors of their 'behaviour' in order to open it up with the goal of influencing it through social technology. The enormous flood of data produced by the population establishment in the decades since World War II, especially in the Global South, serves precisely this vision, even if the statistical factors investigated as influential for childbearing have changed continuously (Schultz 2006; Murphy 2017).

Consequently, all three political forces when talking about 'population' enforce social-technocratic experimentation instead of posing the question of multiple care revolutions and of globally heterogeneous relations of care and childbearing, which are inseparable from basic questions of economics, politics and societal relations to nature. The logic of global feasibility mobilises these effects even when emancipatory approaches do not explicitly think they are doing this. And this social technological engineering has had and continues to have many disempowering, harmful and even violent consequences, especially for those who have always been the focus of repressive programmes of sterilisation, long-term contraception and the devaluation of their lifestyles in relation to having children, because they have been and continue to be stigmatised as 'irresponsibly' multiplying.

## Reproductive Justice in Climate Policies

For all these reasons, the ‘world population problem’ is inextricably embedded in a depoliticising statistical knowledge production, in social-Darwinist and colonial-racist rationalities and narratives, and in socio-technocratic biopolitical visions of feasibility. This is not only true for the explicitly racist version or right-wing ecofascism, but also permeates apparently unpolitical mainstream technocratic environmental data politics and is also a lesson to be learned for problematic birth strike climate activists or posthumanist feminist agendas. The political variable ‘population’ is inseparably connected to the neo-Malthusian reflex, and always casts a necropolitical shadow over ecological politics. An intersectional feminist climate policy agenda should therefore radically criticise this reference to the population discourse instead of docking on to the neo-Malthusian agenda and thereby, in one way or another, reinforcing it.

There are many points of departure for such a radical critique. On the one hand, it is worth linking up with a long history of feminist, anti-racist and anti-eugenic struggles and perspectives. Let us remember, for example, the slogan of the transnational feminist conference ‘People are not population!’ in Bangladesh in 1993. A year before the UN World Population Conference in Cairo, this conference explicitly criticised the concept of ‘population’ and not just concrete experiences of human rights violations. Going further, it is worth recalling the diverse local struggles around the world that, in the face of experiences with anti-natalist and eugenic programmes, have incorporated the right to choose to have children and the right to raise children in good social and ecological conditions into their feminist understanding of reproductive rights (Schultz 2006; Ross 2017). All these movements have reflected on childbearing as a question of intersectionality, long before the academic establishment of this term. In recent years, the increasingly widely received concept of reproductive justice, as formulated by Black feminists in the US since 1994, has invited this reflection and a corresponding activism (Roberts 2015; Ross 2017). This concept provides a framework for feminist struggles around sexuality, abortion, pregnancy, birth and parenthood, viewing these issues from a perspective of marginalised parenthoods and parenthoods declared as illegitimate and incorporating the analysis of social inequality and racism. And reproductive justice provides a framework for opposing the selective and hierarchical constellations of pro- and anti-natalism as unequally distributed at a global level and as involving not only reproductive health but also a broad range of social, health, family, migration, and citizenship policies.

An anti-neo-Malthusian position is central to this framework. As an example of such anti-neo-Malthusian positioning, consider the ‘Renewed Call for a Feminist Resistance to Population Control’ that circulated internationally in 2019 (DifferenTakes 2019).

On the other hand, the trends of politicisation and radicalisation of current climate movements themselves offer a variety of points of departure for countering a neo-Malthusian appropriation. Here, too, the recourse to ‘justice’ in the concept of climate justice makes it possible to question and undermine the technocratic-statistical formulations of problems (Klein 2019b). Similarly, the widespread call for ‘system change not climate change!’ only implies rejecting the abstract calculation of births and people to be prevented, not giving up the search for alternative socio-ecological models of future global coexistence. Here, a lot of Haraway’s speculative visions of situated socioecological kinship relations are possible links which could help to oppose her own populationist

tropes: 'Rather, the Communities of Compost understood their task to be to cultivate and invent the arts of living with and for damaged worlds in place, *not as an abstraction or a type*, but as and for those living and dying in ruined places.' (Haraway 2016, 143, emphasis added) And last but not least, maybe the increased sensibility on global dimensions of necropolitics in times of the Covid 19 pandemic, which makes it possible to recognise the dramatic inequality with respect to who is protected, vaccinated and cared for and who is not, might help to strengthen an intersectional feminist opposition to those politics of reproduction which, in an equally biased way, define which and whose births should be averted in order to preserve the current global status quo.

## Notes

1. Neo-Malthusianism is a political-theoretical perspective that refers to the "principle of population" posited by the British theologian and economist Thomas R. Malthus at the end of the 18th century. The basic position is that the population is in principle growing too fast compared to the resources needed, and therefore poverty and social crises are linked to the cause of 'overpopulation'. The term neo-Malthusianism refers to movements that developed in the 19th century, which referred to Malthus in their crisis diagnosis but differed in the means proposed to cope with 'overpopulation'; they mainly advocated contraceptive and sterilization technologies.
2. The single inverted commas mark those elements of the population discourse which the author wants to quote but distance herself from.
3. By social-Darwinist I mean the class-arrogant perspective that sees those excluded from resources as the 'superfluous' or as those less 'capable of survival' and thus also stigmatised as less worthy of reproduction (even without recourse to the dimension of an evolutionary biological 'quality improvement').
4. The term population establishment refers to the network of national development agencies, multilateral organisations, think tanks, foundations and other actors established since World War II, which organises and coordinates international population programmes on the basis of a common knowledge production about a 'world population problem'.
5. Following Foucault (1991), I understand rationality as a specific epistemological approach to reality that makes certain political strategies appear plausible and rational.
6. Ehrlich and Ehrlich (2009): it was no problem for the Ehrlichs that the apocalyptic predictions of the 'Population Bomb' had not been fulfilled (cf. Hartmann and Barajas-Roman 2009, 71).
7. The author referred to a report of Christian Aid (Ware and Kramer 2019) on the unequal distribution of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.
8. For example the left-liberal German newspaper *taz* organised a public event for a discussion of Smith's book in November 2018. Generally the discourses on the threat of an 'overpopulated' 'Africa' remain almost uncontested. There was one exception when Clemens Tönnies, the football club Schalke's supervisory board chairman, suggested in 2019 to finance power plants in Africa because of climate change so that people there would stop "producing children when it's dark", and the media reacted with charges of racism (see *Die Zeit*, 2.8.2019. <https://www.zeit.de/sport/2019-08/clemens-toennies-tag-des-handwerks-klimawandel-rassismus>)
9. The concepts of 'Umvolkung' and 'Volkstod' are difficult to translate because of the specific German concept of the *Volk* as central for the racist ethnocentric Nazi ideology. Both concepts link the idea of a shrinking, disappearing or degenerating German *Volk* with the narrative of a dangerous and increasing presence of 'other' populations.
10. In this article examples are selected that are especially startling because the proponents stand for transformative politics of change, not for liberal mainstream feminist ideas. Among liberals, there is a long history of feminist consensus with anti-natalist strategies for curbing population growth, often in the name of women's empowerment (Schultz

2010). Recently, for example, Frances Kissling, former director of Catholics for Choice, argued together with utilitarian bioethicist Peter Singer and Population Council member Jotham Musinguzi in favor of neo-Malthusian climate politics under the title 'Talking about overpopulation is taboo. That has to change,' (Kissling, Musinguzi, and Singer 2018)

11. The author gathered impressions in 2019 in discussions with activists at climate camps, among other places. However, the idea of a birth strike was only articulated by some, by no means all, activists in debates on population and climate.
12. The literal translation of the book title is 'Child-free instead of Childless'.
13. The data used by Wynes and Nicholas in order to compare abstaining from having a child (calculated as 58.6 tons CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent emission reductions) with, for example, abstaining from flying (calculated as 1.6 tons for one year) are highly distorted. The individual CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per year of the possible children were calculated with reference to a study by Murtaugh and Schlax (2009) which refers to data from the US, Russia and Japan, and in which the emissions of future grandchildren and even more generations are integrated into the calculation.
14. Haraway does not take into account the fact that these long-term projections to 2100 are permanently being revised to lower levels and are highly speculative (see Stöcker 2019; Schultz 2019b; Vollset et al. 2020). She even presents her own calculation, which suggests an alarmist number of 19 billion humans by 2100 (2018, 74).

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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