Is there a population problem and if there is, can we talk about it?

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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 seven billion threshold was crossed. This is in line with conclusions to the United Nation’s 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 ten by century’s end (UN, 2010). Such on-going increase surely conveys an alarming story to anyone concerned about environmental sustainability and social well-being. Or does it? In my talk I ask why concerns about population growth and over-population have virtually disappeared from the political agenda of developed countries 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 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 or water insecurity and experiences of over-crowding - pre-emptive dismissals tend swiftly to follow. My question, then, is why the population question provokes such hostility and denial.

The analysis that follows identifies five categories of silencing discourse. I call them population-shaming; population-scepticism; population-declinism; population-decomposing and population-fatalism. These are analytic distinctions: in practice these discourses often overlap or work in conjunction. The most obvious factor they share is their 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. It is not my contention that their arguments for disavowing the population question are simply specious but I do think they warrant critical investigation. The question that motivates my inquiry is whether they offer good enough reasons for excluding population talk from public debate or for dismissing it as a possible area for policy intervention. For it seems self-evident that more people, especially more affluent ones, will exacerbate environmental challenges like climate change. It also seems feasible to interpret manifold expressions of public disquiet as being diffuse responses to excessive numbers for whose articulation no politically acceptable discourse currently exists. Inasmuch as these are plausible inferences, there is surely a case for returning to the
population question by re-framing it in light of twenty-first century conditions. This will only be tenable, however, insofar as the historical legacies and current investments in this contentious matter have been addressed and this is the purpose of my talk.

Who is talking about whom?

My paper focuses on population talk in developed countries. This can be broken down into three components: concerning their own demographics, those of developing countries and global numbers more generally. First, and of greatest interest to me, are discussions about their own populations. It is helpful here to summarise a few salient elements of Malthus’ argument in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798). Malthus claimed that while the means of subsistence develop in a linear manner, population grows exponentially and thus considerably more rapidly. The different tempo of these two processes reaches 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. Malthus presented this logic as a universal law of population, which in the long run guarantees a balance between population and resources (Malthus, 2004).

It is hardly surprising that such views should have engendered vehement contestation. Anti-natalist ideas about curtailing the proliferation of the human species challenged deep-seated traditional beliefs; in particular, the pro-natalism that had until then been the historical default. In raising the spectre of excessive numbers, the population question crossed vitalist and religious taboos regarding the sanctity of life and the 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, sexuality and birth. Demographic change entails three principal variables - fertility, mortality and migration - and all provoke profound ethical questions, especially once the state involves itself 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 *et al.*, 1972). Despite the post-war baby boom the rate of increase here was relatively modest, but the multiplication of increased 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. Stabilising population numbers
now 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.

Alongside this utopian vision, President Nixon was warning Congress by 1969 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. A commitment to fund family planning programmes abroad was supplemented by an urgent question for American policymakers: ‘how can we better assist American families so that they will have no more children than they wish to have?’ (Nixon, 2006: 775, 777) Official reports to both the American (1972) and the British (1973) governments would advise that stabilising population numbers was in the national interest. Yet this anti-growth orientation would shortly fall into abeyance and disrepute.

In explaining why, it is clear that in practice debates within and about developed countries cannot be viewed in isolation. Their discourses circulate through and are refracted by a second dimension of population talk because they influence official policies towards population growth in the global South, which are in turn criticised for their assumptions. My account of population-shaming shows how third world suspicion about first world motives for population control policies would rebound to render the topic uncongenial to democratic publics. Of course, many governments in developing countries are still struggling to contain their burgeoning populations (UN, 2011). But even here the epic story of runaway population that formerly galvanised their efforts has become considerably muted. This was essentially a European narrative, anyway, so it is perhaps unsurprising that in this case change can be attributed to the impact of new discursive regimes in the developed world. In other words, there is an ongoing dialectic between different regions’ perspectives on population matters: even where their demographics differ, their discursive frameworks influence one another.

Finally, there are more general concerns within developed countries about the effects of world population growth on the global environment. It is in this context that renewed anxieties have recently been expressed in reports I classify as population-fatalist. Here it is recognised that a multiplicity of small (but expanding) ecological footprints in poor countries plus the larger ones imprinted by richer individuals are collectively responsible for aggravating phenomena like climate change (Wire, 2009; O’Neill, 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: 29) My analysis suggests that world population numbers are hesitantly being re-problematised here. Yet demographic solutions are still neglected, if not rejected explicitly: probably because other population-silencing discourses render them too controversial.

Population talk in developed nations is, in conclusion, a complicated matter because concerns about their own population trends tend to be reflected in policies towards populations in other parts of the world, with population talk in one context rebounding on another and acquiring political and affective charge on the way. At the same time, however, this interaction means that discursive convergence occurs as transnational discourses circulate through bodies like the UN or World Bank, shared academic currencies and international relations where colonialism, aid, trade and geo-political rivalries all have their population dimensions. It is worth emphasising in this context the significance of major world population and development conferences hosted by the UN. The run up 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 have been particularly significant, to the extent that the name of their location is sufficient to identify the orientation of new hegemonic frameworks that emerged from discursive shifts occurring under their aegis. They were held in Bucharest (1974), Mexico City (1984) and Cairo (1994).

Discourses of dismissal and disavowal

**Population-shaming**

Among my five silencing discourses, population-shaming is most indicative of a 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 ulterior motives of a heinous nature (Furedi, 1997). Sometimes, advocates of population stabilisation are presented as misanthropic people-haters or as inhumane harbingers of Malthusian positive checks. Radical ecologists who argue for reducing human numbers from a post-humanist perspective may also be dismissed as misanthropic. Thus Murray Bookchin asserts that deep ecology ‘blames “Humanity” as such for the ecological crisis – especially ordinary “consumers” and “breeders of children”.’ (quoted in Dobson, 2007: 47) But the real 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.

The most serious charge here concerns racism (with its retinue of colonialism, imperialism, eugenics and genocide) and it is this association this is probably most effective in silencing population talk. But why is this association so powerful? Are environmental or well-being arguments for reducing population 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 (Hardt and Negri, 2004, 165-67). The relevant discussion occurs in chapter 2.2 of Multitude, where it concludes a sub-section called ‘Global Apartheid’.

‘Finally’, Hardt and Negri 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’, they contend, ‘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, I suggest, on strategic signifiers that précis a particular political past. Reconstructing it can therefore help in assessing the contingency of the three linkages the book makes 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 other words, 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 under-tones.

Such charges are by no means unfounded, with India especially commending itself as the referent for Hardt and Negri’s invective. Mass famines here had sometimes been presented by the colonial administration 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 geo-political 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). When compulsory sterilisation was deployed during India’s Emergency Period (1975-76), the West was regarded as complicit and population control became indelibly marked as coercive, resulting in widespread disenchantment with the cause of population limits.

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 the 1974 population conference in Bucharest (Finkle and Crane, 1975; Hodson, 1998). They interpreted the population policies advocated by the American 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 do therefore 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 and because they are unspecific about these circumstances, they misleadingly imply that all family planning programmes with wider demographic goals are coercive and racially-motivated. Despite Multitude’s focus on the poor, its authors therefore ignore the bleak consequences of rapid population growth on the everyday lives of those who inhabit mega-slums or of unmet need for contraception in many poor countries (Davis, 2006; Stephenson et al., 2010). Nor can they consider the global consequences of increasing 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. For much of the twentieth century the project of improving the species’ genetic stock had influential adherents. By the 1920s, however, negative eugenics included sterilising the degenerate: the insane, the criminal, the dissolute, certain races. This policy gained its most notorious expression under Nazism, where population policy meant genocidal attempts at exterminating Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and so on. This explains Hardt and Negri’s condemnation of those who are ‘concerned primarily with which social groups reproduce and which do not.’ For them the link is undoubtedly reinforced by their indebtedness to Foucault, who had linked demography, biopolitics and racism. Foucault suggested that treating population as a matrix of different races permitted the state to kill others as a condition of making life healthier (Foucault, 2003: 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, these references to eugenics remain very powerful. Yet again, their link to population policy is specific and contingent. It is surely not a good enough reason
for avoiding population talk in the current century although it does provide a good explanation for our enduring reluctance to engage with it and a reminder of the need for vigilance.

In a third linkage, Hardt and Negri refer to `racial panic`: a phenomenon sometimes 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 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 reprehensible form of race suicide (Roosevelt, 1903). It is indeed the case that population policies have often been motivated by nationalist or ethnic desires to increase a people`s powers by multiplying more strenuously than its competitors (although it is by no means limited to white European populations and it is equally associated with pro-natalist policies). Hardt and Negri are right to alert readers to a variant of demographic politics whereby racist or ethno-centrist motives underpin policies designed to achieve differential birth rates.

In a further twist to this association, a form of racial panic might currently be identified within developed countries where unprecedented inward migration flows have occurred since the mid-1990s. Ironically, immigration has been encouraged by population-sceptic and population-declinist arguments for increasing population levels. As a consequence, migration has replaced fertility as the principal demographic index currently galvanising public anxiety about population growth. Here, links to racist anxieties may more readily be made and these circulate through fertility issues inasmuch as immigrants tend to have higher birth rates than their hosts, which can significant impact on a country`s racial and ethno-cultural composition (UN, 2000; Coleman, 2010; Kaufmann, 2010). Perhaps this accounts for a reinvigoration of population-shaming. Yet it is far from self-evident that concerns over the ecological effects of too many affluent consumers are motivated by fears of race, as opposed to ecological, suicide. The connections certainly reinforce the sense in which population numbers are an inherently controversial issue; but they also pose the question of whether the ramifications of demographic change and the anxieties they provoke are not better subjected to public deliberation than rejected as too shameful to acknowledge.

An article in the New Statesman states: `We dare not discuss population growth lest we be called racist` (NS, 2004). Population-shaming additionally entails being called misogynist. Again, such charges help to keep the population question off the political agenda
by embarrassing its exponents. Despite feminism’s support for reproductive autonomy, some feminists expressed antipathy to the population establishment no less fervent that Hardt and Negri’s. This mainly pertained to policies directed at developing countries during the 1970s, too. Not only did the aims of population control result in women’s reproductive capacities being treated in a narrow, instrumental way, women argued, but a misogynist ethos allowed their fertility to be blamed for under-development and its consequences, while condemning women to unsafe contraceptive procedures that ignored their broader reproductive health and subjected them to rationalised regimes of control that suppressed their rights (Hartmann, 1987; Rao, 2004). Yet do such charges not demonstrate the importance of including women’s voices in population discussions rather than foreclosing debate, not least because population, reproduction and gender are so intimately related and because women might be said to have a particular interest in the well-being of future generations? Like other aspects of population-shaming discourse, however, charges of misogyny help to keep the population question off the political agenda by embarrassing its exponents.

Population-scepticism

Although demography is for the most part an arid discipline concerned with population trends 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 a population problem. Inasmuch as growth is still recognised as problematic, it is so only in a local and temporary sense. Worldwide, the population question is dismissed as anachronistic because fertility is declining almost everywhere and global population is expected to stabilise during the next century. 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 so-called demographic revisionists has become entangled with neo-liberal and social conservative values. Both variants of population-scepticism are hostile to an alternative Malthusian narrative. In the first case this is judged to be obsolete because it is relevant only for early phases of modernisation; in the second it is rejected for being predicated on a fundamental misunderstanding about modernity’s capacities for sustained growth.

The status of DTT is ambiguous: it is variously presented as a theory or analytical framework; a historical or predictive model; a paradigm, hypothesis, heuristic or ideal (Kirk, 1996: 384). Although critical theorists pay it scant attention it also comprises one of the great narratives of modernisation. As Lee and Reher 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. (Lee and Reher, 2011: 1)

DTT identifies four demographic stages that are integral to modernisation. Relatively stable populations with high fertility and mortality (DT 1) are disrupted by modernisation as biopolitical regimes reduce (especially infant) 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 because of the momentum of large, youthful populations (DT 3). Only in a final stage is transition completed as the population ages and growth slows, stops or even reverses, 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 widespread 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 as a reason for ignoring the population question.

First, it is evident that there is a degree of circularity in population-sceptical evidence. While statistical support for worldwide transition is derived from population projections, the projections themselves involve assumptions for which DTT plays an important role. Projections ‘must not be confused with current reality’ in part because ‘projection assumptions reflect the spirit of the era in which they are framed. To them are transmitted its hopes and fears.’ (Le Bras, 2008 :153) Current optimism is fuelled by DTT, which assuages earlier fears about growth; ‘assumption drag’, meanwhile, can mean assumptions lag behind trend shifts (such as higher fertility rates in many developed countries). Projections are not predictions; indeed, their uncertainty is indicated by the production of several variants (ONS, 2008:23, 24; van de Kaa, 1996). So while, for example, the UN’s medium variant for 2100 is 10.1 billion, this increases to 27 billion were current (2005-2010) fertility rates to remain constant (UN, 2010: 1). DTT’s assumption that fertility rates will converge around or below replacement level relies on a modernising presupposition that secular, Western attitudes to contraception and family size will become universal. But can this be relied upon in a multicultural world, especially one wherein religious, patriarchal cultures are gaining relative demographic advantage (Kaufmann, 2010)? Furthermore, does a universal completion of transition not rely on contingent factors such as the willingness of international donors to fund
family planning programmes and of couples to use them? Ironically, there is evidence here that population-scepticism may itself be disincentivising the very policies transition relies on.

Second, critical theorists will recognise DTT as a typically modern grand narrative (Szreter, 1993; Greenhalgh, 1996): it claims universal applicability but it is European experience that provides its template and ideal. A problem arises in this case if diverse transitional patterns are classified as manifestations of a deterministic mechanism guaranteeing that transition will everywhere be completed and is irreversible. 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.

Third, DTT is itself time-bound: it refers to the transitional period but cannot predict what happens thereafter. The narrative ends, as modernisation tales typically do, with a return to equilibrium. Theories of a second transition suggest that a spread of late modern self-expressive norms may engender permanently very low fertility (Lesthaeghe, 2010), therefore reinforcing population-scepticism (and declinism) by anticipating falling numbers. Any such speculations have difficulty including unexpected contingencies or feedback loops. But let us assume that population does stabilise at around 10 billion or does decline. Would this be a good enough reason for dismissing population anxieties, as sceptics maintain?

This question is particularly pertinent from a quality of life perspective. Would environmentalists not still wish to ask 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? Alternatively in the case of decreasing numbers, should exponents of demographic revisionism and of what I call population-declinism, who currently urge pro-natalist policies in order to increase the post-transitional birth rate, not be challenged to justify their arguments in relation to the longer-term well-being of future generations and the planet? There is an important distinction to be made here between scepticism levelled at the prospect of continuing demographic growth and normative doubts regarding the social benefits of living at very high densities. Should the prospect of population decline not be welcomed inasmuch as a less crowded world might be more pleasant as well as more sustainable? It is partly to suppress this last possibility, I suggest in the second part of this section, that population-scepticism has been embraced by neo-liberals 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 (Whitehouse, 1984). My analysis is designed to show the high ideological stakes the population game had assumed by the mid-1980s as neo-liberal 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 mid-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), was so surprising.

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.’ (Whitehouse, 1984: 578).

Such arguments contribute to population-decomposing and they have affinity with population-shaming, too, but with two important differences. From the neo-liberal 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 recasting the problem of population growth as a problem of the interventionist authoritarian state.

While exponents of DTT are sceptical that population increase remains a problem since growth rates are slowing, the Whitehouse 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’: ‘More people do not necessarily mean less growth’ (Whitehouse, 1984: 576). Whether growth is an asset or an obstacle depends, rather, on exogenous constraints 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 neo-liberal, pro-growth arguments. Julian Simon, 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 as well as yielding economies of scale (Simon, 1977). This pre-Malthusian approach now furnishes the standard riposte to neo-Malthusian limits-to-growth arguments.

Where population growth did remain 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 (Whitehouse, 1984:575-6). 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 in co-opting revisionist scepticism are made clear by a lightly coded attack on members of 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 an 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 `anti-intellectualism’ of the counter-culture’s anti-scientific romanticism, whose appearance is attributed 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 neo-liberals 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 leftwing infantilism and 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-sceptical discourse, it is important to notice how social conservatism was also interwoven in the new discourse. Once population growth had been discounted as a relevant issue, it was easier for social conservatives like President Reagan 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’ (Whitehouse 1984: 578). This judgement was not merely rhetorical: it had immediate practical implications for family planning organisations and NGOs, which now lost American 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. She points out that some anti-abortionists also oppose family planning and thus welcome the demise of population concerns (Campbell, 2007: 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 neo-liberal 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 arises from and expresses the final stage of demographic transition. It warrants its own discursive category, however, because in addition to focusing on the situation of specifically developed countries, it differs from scepticism in two significant ways: regarding mood and policy. In the case of mood, its affective tenor is quite different from the optimistic, pro-growth dynamic of political scepticism. As transition completes itself, the population ages. This phenomenon engenders a sense of melancholia and loss connected to fears of relative decline. Population-declinism is currently powerful in foreclosing concern over population growth because rather than welcoming this demographic shift as a sign that modernity’s enormous demographic expansion is ending and as a prelude to more sustainable numbers, it perceives an ageing society as one where characteristics attributed to elderly people are generalised to describe the entire culture. It is thus despondent and pessimistic about the completion of transition (Coole, 2012a: 53-56). 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’) suggest to declinists that low-fertility societies are destined to fail relative to more youthful, energetic
competitors. This means failure in the global economy as well as weakness in the military theatre (Jackson and Howe, 2008).

Such anxieties induce the 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 the population and arrest its decrease (Dixon and Margolis, 2006). They also commend more subtle, biopolitical measures for influencing population numbers – notably, engineering behaviour modification through tweaks to the tax and benefit system in order to increase the birth rate – which generally function beneath the radar of liberal worries about personal liberty and therefore avoid contestation. In 2009, almost half the governments in developed countries regarded their population growth as too low (UN, 2009). From the EU to Japan, strategies are in place to raise fertility (Commission, 2005). Yet this is never accompanied by any discussion of whether further population growth will enhance ordinary people’s quality of life, nor is it linked to the environmental concerns voiced in other policy arenas (Coleman and Rowthorn, 2011).

There are undoubtedly many challenges posed by population ageing, yet it is important to distinguish between two causes of this phenomenon. Longer life expectancy means more elderly people are around and this is likely to persist as a worldwide phenomenon in which the median age rises. It need not be perceived in declinist terms but this would require a radical change in current perceptions of older people and in evaluations of the good life. The rhythm of transition and its effects on the age profile also, however, produce an acute, if shorter-lived, hiatus, especially if fertility has declined rapidly as it did in many post-war Western countries. In this case the number of older people as a proportion of the population they will be unusually high for a while, resulting in several decades of unusually high dependency ratios. It is this shorter-term problem that animates most current attempts to increase population levels, that is, to counteract the stabilisation that scepticism relies on.

In order to understand such aims, an offshoot of the transitional narrative has to be invoked. This concerns a ‘demographic dividend’ in which the focus is on the age profile rather than size of a population. The substantial numbers of infants that accompany high fertility, like the large numbers of elderly that signify its fall, mean high dependency ratios that deplete savings and investment. During transition, however, a country will enjoy a brief window, or dividend, as its age bulge moves into working age. Productivity will increase and the dependency ratio will be low. As the window closes, the dominant economic-growth framework laments the passing of large fertile and productive cohorts and endeavours to replenish them. In practice, pro-natalism is largely irrelevant because the situation will be
easing by the time new citizens enter the labour-force, but the longer-term consequence will be to increase overall numbers. Although immigration achieves faster demographic effects, it too seems a rather short-sighted remedy to population ageing since immigrants also age and will need further new arrivals to service them, unless their birth rate remains above replacement level. In either case, further population increase will have been engendered (UN, 2000; House of Lords, 2008), with significant environmental consequences. Yet the possibility of decreasing overall numbers particularly animates population-declinists inasmuch as they share revisionists’ and neo-liberals’ views that population and economic growth go hand in hand. There currently seems to be little appetite for questioning the wisdom or even the accuracy of this formula.

**Population-decomposing**

The 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, families 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, and with the notable exception of DTT, the broad narratives that were previously used to problematise and politicise general demographic trends have largely disintegrated. The causalities they relied upon have been ruled out as empirically unverifiable. The ramifications of population growth that these narratives and causalities 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 the concept. Talking about population as a totality that can be planned and managed has come to be regarded as not only political dangerous but also as methodologically crude. This is a more elusive discursive effect than the first three categories but I believe 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 population-scepticism but the argument is rather different in its aversion to referencing overall population size. The numbers game is played by those who ask: are we too many? Is the world over-populated in the senses that the mass of human flesh is unsustainable or that thickening population densities degrade our quality of life? When the limits-to-growth framework was current, iconic texts like Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (Ehrlich, 1972) were explicit about population being a numbers game. In light of an imminent environmental crisis, Ehrlich
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' (Preface, 1972).

Such claims were typical of Malthusian arguments regarding three politically salient implications. First, reproduction is classified as what J.S. Mill would call (and indeed did call in this case) an other-regarding act. As opposed to self-regarding acts where personal liberty is defended, these are acts that society may legitimately regulate in the name of social utility because they significantly affect others’ interests. Second, population is assumed to be a macro-level, structural phenomenon that needs to be addressed at a social rather than an individual level. Finally, a somewhat Machiavellian logic is implied whereby robust regulatory means are justified to avoid catastrophic ends.

Ehrlich had concluded that ‘no matter how you slice it, population is a numbers game.’ (1972: 3f.) 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 coercive measures. As a consequence the focus on population size and growth rates, especially when linked to targets and sanctions (as they were in India), fell into disrepute. This antipathy is encapsulated in the United Nations Population Fund (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 alongside the ‘numbers game’ for being antithetical to human rights (UNFPA, Homepage: 4; UNFPA, 2008: 1). In sum, even to focus on overall demographic quantities is presented as anathema to personal choice (regarding family size) and individual rights (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 one would not wish to deride these measures. But the change of emphasis they entail has helped to foreclose discussions about overall numbers while supporting the view that population is best approached at an individual or familial level. This was manifest in the Clinton Administration, which espoused a ‘comprehensive and far-reaching new approach to international population issues’ that focused on building access to woman-centred ‘quality reproductive health care’ while ‘supporting the empowerment of women’. In addition to free markets, educating women and attending to their wider reproductive health needs became (and remains) both the principal remedy for population growth and for under-development. At the Cairo conference (1994), this woman-centred perspective re-oriented the dominant population framework.

Legitimate demands by women, coupled with their antipathy to the population establishment, had the effect of bolstering population-decomposing and disavowing the numbers game. Critics like Ehrlich associated the new focus with an ‘irresponsible wave of
political correctness’ that saw the environmental repercussions of population growth succumbing to ‘a narrow focus on issues of reproductive rights and maternal and child health’ (Ehrlich, 2008: 107): concerns that are in no way reprehensible but which have had the consequence of displacing population numbers as a global and ecological issue. Campbell cites Cairo as ‘the turning point in removing the population subject from policy discourse’, noting that talking about population had become politically incorrect by the mid-1990s because it was perceived as disadvantageous to women (Campbell, 2007: 237, 243). In this sense population-decomposing is reinforced by population-shaming.

This decomposing trend has been reinforced from another direction, too: aggregate population numbers have come to be regarded as a methodologically crude and statistically simplistic form of data, thus further undermining the possibility of advancing (neo-)Malthusian arguments. On the one hand, while the overall numbers and projections that have been grist for the numbers game are still produced (mainly from decennial censuses), computers can now store, correlate and model considerably more complex data in the form of regression tables and probability sets. Figures at this more fine-grained level make less obvious head-line news or dramatic narratives. Complementing this emphasis on complexity is a widespread view that population dynamics, such as age composition or urbanisation, are more relevant for policymaking than the broader trajectories of population size. This, too, dissolves narrative impact by translating demographic trends into numerous policy inputs. These disaggregating effects thus serve to de-politicise and de-problematise the issue because as data has been refined and disaggregated, the demographic phenomena that mobilise players of the numbers game have been 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 last 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: 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. Instead, it now ‘focuses on measuring and modelling the dynamics of various populations’: a process he judges valuable but peripheral to ‘the really big demographic issue’ of the environmental cost of population growth and its rectification (Ehrlich, 2008: 103). More ideologically, it might also be noted that macro-level analysis was formerly associated with structural, Marxist approaches that have also fallen from grace.
This emphasis on population variables at the individual or household level (for example, regarding correlations between family size, income and savings) reinforces the political turn to individual choice and rights. For although these methodological and normative shifts are clearly distinct, they converge inasmuch as population becomes a micro-level, fine-grained, disaggregated phenomenon in which on the one hand, individual liberty (to choose one’s family size) is extolled in lieu of state regulation and on the other, choice is understood in terms of maximising the unit’s utility through calculating the costs of additional children. What I wish to stress here is that both kinds of population-decomposing help in their own way to demolish the framework in which population numbers matter and in which society has an interest in and responsibility for a sustainable level compatible with ecological resources and social well-being. In short, population-decomposing makes it very difficult to identify, problematise or debate population growth as a social issue amenable to democratic debate.

The final component of population-decomposing I want to mention is more elusive and ontological yet I believe it also plays its part in decomposing population, in this case by de-materialising it. As developed countries have developed knowledge or service economies, and as the more obviously material costs of industrialisation on the environment 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 writes evocatively of a ‘weightless world’ and urges governments to embrace an age of de-materialisation (Coyle, 1997). This, I suggest, is part of an increasing tendency to understand social systems in virtual terms. Thus production and consumption are re-figured as virtual flows of data, symbols and images that can be regarded as having little actual impact on the environment. Similarly, the human capital that drives the knowledge economy is a distraction from the material goods and space that all embodied humans require. As a consequence, it has become easier to ignore the material supports that even post-Fordist societies require and therefore to substitute the idea of sustained, indefinite growth for earlier discourses that emphasised material limits to growth on 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 indefinably elastic and felicitously ethereal. This is surely, however, a dangerous illusion.

Population-fatalism

In this final category of silencing discourse, I use the term population-fatalism to categorise some contemporary inquiries into the challenges posed by population growth. Because they are testimony to renewed concern about numbers and the challenges growth entails, and because they are undertaken in a spirit of scientific inquiry, they are relatively congenial for worries about population. I include them among silencing discourses, however, precisely
because their overall tone is not fatalistic: they are mainly confident that the challenges of nine billion (or seventy million in the UK case) can be met. Yet 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 focus on its impacts and calculate their abatement costs. This distinguishes their arguments from population-scepticism, which does not see population growth as a problem, from population-declinism, which encourages population growth to foreclose its shrinking, and from population-decomposing which disavows the very framework of numbers. But it is equally averse to considering anti-natalist population policies.

*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: 12). This formula of neglectful concern has been the hallmark of other recent studies, which prefer technological solutions to controversial political interventions. The British Government’s Foresight Programme has produced two recent reports that fit this genre. *Land Futures – Making the Most of Land in the C21st* (2010) links population growth in the UK 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* similarly 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, 2100: Introduction: 9) But in neither case is there any suggestion that further population growth might be tackled. The Economist’s recent *The 9 billion-people question. A special report on feeding the world* (Economist, 2011) and the Institution of Mechanical Engineers’ *Population: One Planet, Too Many People?* follow a similar logic, with (bio-)technological solutions being proffered for a demographic fait accompli (Institute of Mechanical Engineers, 2011).

The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution’s *The Environmental Impacts of Demographic Change in the UK* (RCEP, 2011) is more explicit in excluding population growth as an area for policy despite acknowledging its significance. Accepting that in the UK the ‘total population is likely to continue to grow, at a historically relatively high rate’ and that some regions will suffer ‘obvious pressure on infrastructure, services and environment’, RCEP, sections 2.22, 6.2), the report offers a clear choice: ‘Should the Government seek to influence demographic changes in the UK, or is it generally more appropriate to seek to mitigate the potential environmental impacts of those changes?’ Its response is unequivocal: the latter is declared not to be ‘a good basis for policy’. The Commission maintains that (unspecified) ‘objections on social and ethical grounds would outweigh the environmental gains’ (RCEP: section 6.7, 6.8, 6.9), while it rules out using the very language of limits, in
favour of negotiable, flexible and costed restraints (RCEP, 2011: sections 4.2 – 4.9; Coole, 2012b). This combination of demographic concern and policy exclusion is indicative of a diffuse return to anxieties about the sustainability and effects of projected population growth. But in its current form it is too hesitant to engender any real debate on this important matter.

Conclusion
In this article I have asked why, as the twenty-first century proceeds inexorably towards a world population of nine billion plus, there is so little discussion of the socially and environmentally damaging effects of continuing population growth. I have focused on developed countries, where the silence has been most profound, and identified a number of political and normative discourses, as well as some methodological reasons, why there is currently no discursive framework within which population numbers can be problematised or remedial action commended, despite projected expansions. Some of these discourses were found to disavow the population question altogether or declare it obsolete; others preclude its articulation as politically dangerous or statistically crude. I have contrasted this situation with the 1960s and early 70s, when limits to population and economic growth were regarded as a radical cause and population size was treated as integral to worries about environmental degradation and the quality of life. I have suggested that similar anxieties are beginning to re-emerge in light of renewed concerns over resource insecurity, environmental crisis and experiences of urban density. But until the ghosts of the past have been excised, the role of population growth cannot resume its important place as an integral component of the overall sustainability puzzle.
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