



## What to Think of Overpopulation (as a Cultural Studies Scholar)?

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Recently, my son, a first-grader in a German-Danish school in Haderslev, had a project week on the 'future of human housing'. His task was to realize an idea and handcraft possible future housing solutions. Since he is a *Star Wars* fan, I suppose, his idea was to handcraft a spaceship in which one could live on any given planet – his preference was Mars since there might be water on Mars, he explained. His spaceship, made out of cardboard and toilet rolls, mostly, wrapped in aluminum paper, was quite innovative. It included, for instance, a device for recycling solar or other energy resources. Others in his class crafted so called 'tiny houses' for future overcrowded cities or houses on water, in case there won't be any space left to live on solid ground. When I asked him why he decided to craft a spaceship that enabled people to live on other planets, he told me that his class discussed overpopulation as one of the major problems that humanity would face in the future and that it was their task to find solutions to this problem.

Overpopulation is, next to global warming, authoritarian surveillance states or a Third World War, one of the major dystopic fears we have when we imagine humanity's future. Perhaps it is therefore a popular topic in school classes today. However, in the political sciences and its related fields, sociology, economics and demography in particular, overpopulation is debated at least since Thomas Robert Malthus published his *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798). Resulting from it were not only debates, but also political initiatives and governmental programs to prevent it from happening.<sup>1</sup> Unsurprisingly, many futurists, sci-fi authors and all sorts of conspiracy theorists are drawn to overpopulation as well as to its associated themes – the exhaustion of natural resources, the pollution of our environment or the growing social problems in overcrowded cities. As a Film Studies scholar, I could not avoid noticing, that overpopulation (or the 'thought experiment' of how to avoid it) has already become a sort of cliché in the Sci-Fi genre, established early on in classics such as *Logan's Run* (1976)

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<sup>1</sup> Apart from the United Nation's Population Fund (UNFPA), there are numerous other non-governmental organizations worldwide that study overpopulation or promote initiatives to prevent it, e.g. Deutsche Stiftung Weltbevölkerung (Germany), Rientrodolce (Italy), Ecopop (Switzerland), Worldwatch Institute (USA), to name but a few.



and further developed in more recent examples such as *Downsizing* (2017). Inhabiting (or “terraforming”) other planets, because Mother Earth is “too full”, is (as even my seven-year-old son has already noticed) another immensely popular Sci-Fi motif, a most recent example of which is *Passengers* (2016).

However, despite of its immense popularity in both culture and society, overpopulation is, unlike environmental issues, trauma and war or the threat of surveillance states to democracies, not a popular topic among Cultural Studies scholars. The question is, of course, why this is the case. I would like to argue here that this is the case, because Cultural Studies scholars have on the one hand conveniently dismissed the fears and arguments against overpopulation and on the other seem to enter into a never-ending conundrum of contradictions and inconvenient antagonisms (as they do with other topics, such as poverty), when they tackle either the realities or the fears of population growth. Let me explain this with a set of four classical arguments against what I suggest to call “fear-mongering, dystopian overpopulation doomsayers”, and outline briefly why and in which way these arguments coalesce with the general viewpoints of many Cultural Studies scholars and why they are inherently contradictory.

### **1. Overpopulation Is Not the Real Problem, Uneven Distribution of Wealth and Resources Is**

This is a classical Marxist counter-argument to Malthus, who was obviously wrong with his predictions that an increase of people on earth would create a shortage of food supply and other resources. However, let us assume – as a thought experiment – the probably impossible utopia of having a kind of global (perhaps less autocratic) China, in which the UN would redistribute wealth and resources across the globe fairly, so that all of us would share, more or less, the same amount of financial, educational, technological and health-related resources. However, according to well-known figures from rich countries like Germany or Japan, wealth necessarily leads to less children being born and so, ultimately, a more regulated and even distribution of wealth and resources would then necessarily lead to less and less human population. But this is not the end of the line here, as we all know, because more wealth also leads to longer life expectancies. Hence, even distribution of wealth would, no doubt, create happy, but older societies, in which equality would become much harder to maintain, since it would be difficult to redistribute wealth without income from younger working people.

As demography teaches us, birth and death rates are at balance at high levels in preindustrial societies, but in developing countries and highly industrialized ones the balance can only be restored by maintaining (or controlling) low fertility *and* death rates, just like China does, because the other alternative, high death rates, is morally unacceptable. The “Chinese model”, however, contradicts with our cherished ideas about



reproductive rights for women and gender equality. The result of this little thought experiment is that equality would actually create only equality on a short-term basis, if we are to maintain our rights to freedom of choice and gender equality. Hence, in my opinion, this counter-argument to Malthus has (besides being somewhat utopian) some serious inconsistencies.

## **2. Global Population Growth Will Soon Reach Its Peak / A Global Tragedy Will End Population Growth Anyway**

As I am writing this piece amidst the spread of the Corona Virus, let us briefly recount how we (Cultural Studies scholars) used these two (related) arguments in the past. The former was *the* “sedative pill” (prescribed by the UN) to not worry, so to speak, about overpopulation. It is based on well-argued estimates by demographic specialists at the UN and elsewhere and has been another favorite (Cultural Studies) counter-argument to doomsayers<sup>2</sup>. The problem with it is that this is indeed only an estimate, a median prediction, that on the one hand strongly resonates with our conception of space (on earth) as a somehow limited entity. However, if we recount that, for instance, in a city like Manila, an average of approx. 46.000 people live on 1 square kilometer only, the “limited space” argument becomes highly problematic. Now, the actual (demographer’s) argument behind this prediction is not related to scarcity of space, but again it is age-related. Since the global population becomes not only (relatively) wealthier, but also older on average, population numbers would reach a peak at around the year 2100 (approx. 10 billion), after which global population numbers would decrease. Yet, once again, these are only large-scale predictions.

In reality, (economic or population) growth rates may vary greatly across regions in Africa, Asia or South America, so that there is a great degree of unpredictability involved here. As for the latter argument – to expect a global catastrophe which would wipe out most of humanity anyway – is, as already mentioned, morally unacceptable, and besides that pretty cynical. Yet, it is sometimes silently, at other times openly considered by those Cultural Studies scholars, who have given up on parts of humanity anyway (since they are either patriarchal sexists, mean racists, environmental polluters, narcissistic CEO’s or ignorant animal-eaters).<sup>3</sup> However, we just need to recall the death toll of the great Influenza pandemic in 1918 (just after World War I), which shows that even two major global tragedies that hit the world within a very short time span – causing death tolls, that

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<sup>2</sup> See the graph by the UN’s Department of Economic and Social Affairs (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Patricia MacCormack, for instance, has argued in a similar vein in her controversial book *Ahuman Manifesto* (2020), namely to avoid human procreation altogether, in order to save earth from humans.



we can today only imagine in post-apocalyptic films and popular culture – cannot stop the global population from growing even faster.

### **3. Urbanization (or the Accumulation of Wealth in Cities) Is the Real Problem, since there Is Enough Unpopulated (Rural) Spaces Left on Earth**

There are several problems with this argument as well. First of all, it ignores the fact that urbanization is a historical dynamic that is tightly connected to capitalism – not with Capitalism as an ideology (with a capital C), but with the notion of capitalism as “accumulation of wealth”. Large cities have always been magnets, since they accumulate wealth and resources, pulling people from the countryside in search of a better life and opportunities towards them. However, with the emergence of capitalism around 1800, this historical dynamic has been only accelerating ever since – and there is no end in sight. Cities or large urban centers, today particularly those south of the Equator, won’t cease to attract people any time soon, as long as rural regions suffer from land-grabbing by large corporations, environmental disasters or lack of educational opportunities and jobs. The argument that we could (somehow) regulate and redistribute populations across the globe to less populated rural regions is, above that, not only unrealistic, but also undemocratic and ultimately a fantasy of (fascist or communist) authoritarian regimes. Denmark has, for instance, planned to delegate immigrants from the Near East to an underpopulated island, resonating uncannily with similar fascist ideas from the past.<sup>4</sup>

### **4. Overpopulation Is a Classical Right-Wing Conspiracy Theory, Ultimately Directed Against the Concept of Multiculturalism**

As for fascist fears and ideas, more contemporary right-wing “the boat is full”<sup>5</sup> sentiments, ultimately directed against immigrants from the global South with large families, have been, traditionally and rightfully, a red flag to CS scholars. Particularly under attack was and still is the concept of multiculturalism, which has been declared as a leftist fantasy that was doomed to fail from the beginning. Multiculturalism is a key term here, because in order for a society to become truly “multicultural”, there needs to be an influx of migrants in order to create a balance in numbers between majority and minority cultures, without one dominating others. Never mind the fact that cities like London, Frankfurt or Brussels are *already* multicultural, meaning that they have long ceased to look like some kind of homogenous monocultural fantasy, my argument would be to nevertheless take these worries seriously. A colleague of mine – an immigrant himself by the way – recently complained to me that Munich does not “look Bavarian” anymore, because its inner city is

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance: Abend 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Eva Horn addresses some of these points in her book *The Future as Catastrophe* (2018: 89-133)



“full with immigrants” and their shops. Now, I do not consider my colleague to be overtly racist. He probably just expected (as a tourist) “authentic” Bavarian shops when he visits Munich. My point here is that it would be a grave mistake to disregard these, let’s call them, more benevolently perhaps, “claustrophobic” fantasies, as mere “conspiracy theories”. As the recent success of right-wing parties in the global North have shown, it is hard to argue that 20%, 30% or, as in the case of the UK and US, even more than 50% of the population, suffers from delusions. Those who know, for instance, the difference of driving the German *Autobahn*, say in 1995 and 2020, also know that overcrowded spaces are not a mere illusion, but a concrete reality. What we are dealing with here instead is a huge dissatisfaction by working class people who feel excluded. What we have learned in the recent years is that elusive (or indeed elitist) concepts like “multiculturalism” won’t help to establish a renewed social bond in our increasingly polarized societies.

### **So, What to Think of It?**

Let’s reformulate this question and ask “how” rather than “what” to think of overpopulation as a Cultural Studies scholar. In other words, how should we change our attitudes and mindsets (and accordingly theories) in order to fully engage with both the realities and fears towards global population growth. Firstly, instead of dismissing the, it seems, cyclically reappearing “boat is full” sentiments as nothing but (German) *angst*, we, as Cultural Studies scholars, need to actively engage with, analyze and criticize this kind of claustrophobic sentiments, which form the basis of at least some of the conspiracy theories to which not only right wingers are increasingly drawn to. Hence, instead of complacently dismissing these fears as nothing but right-wing fantasies, proliferated by a minority of dangerously un- or half-educated people, we finally need to enter into a constructive public dialogue, for instance by making our critical deconstructions more accessible (readable, that is), in order to renew the social bonds between the university-educated elite and the working class, but also between immigrants and natives. Secondly, we need to acknowledge that population growth is a reality and engage with what other segments of society and science also consider a serious problem for future societies. That means, we need to actually check the numbers instead of arrogantly ignoring or relativizing them by using outworn theories to explain it away. Thirdly, even though overpopulation is not really a problem in Germany, the UK or Japan – and hence indeed nothing but delusional *angst* in developed countries – it is a reality in the global South, which means, that we need to now truly globalize and transnationalize Cultural Studies, instead of remaining ignorant to the rest of the world (particularly Africa) as well as of the greater contexts that leads us more and more to conveniently retreat into studying our petty First World problems.



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