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# From Malthus to far-right terrorists: an explorative study on the uses and abuses of the ‘overpopulation’ discourse

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## ABSTRACT

In the 19th century, Thomas Malthus introduced the concept of human overpopulation into the scientific demographic debate, establishing the myth of population growth causing famine and starvation. The concept has recently resurfaced in international discussions on climate change and world leaders’ speeches. Still, it will likely come into the spotlight in the coming years of the climate crisis, mass displacement, and migration. Our research examines literary and visual texts from the early to the most recent debates, declarations, and uses. Our focus is primarily on the current academic and eco-fascist uses of the concept.

## Introduction

This article analyzes the concept of human ‘overpopulation’ in the public sphere, including its online presence. The aim is to investigate the concept’s past and present significance through the semiotic study of academic and cultural documents. Our corpus includes a series of written, oral, and visual texts. Amongst them, both well-known and lesser-known documents, ranging from 1798 (when Thomas Malthus’ *An Essay on the Principle of Population* was published) to the recent writings of white supremacist perpetrators of heinous massacres (2011 - 2019). There seems to be an unfortunate continuity between the term’s scientific and political uses, based on an equally unreflective semantics of ‘reality’ (or ‘truth’). Therefore, we need to examine how the referential illusion is constituted and maintained (Grei-mas 2007: 272) in passing from scientific to political discourse.

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The analysis consists of a qualitative, exploratory investigation, which employs literary and visual semiotics in political communication studies. By demarcating a specific field for research, it seeks to deduce some implicit rules, namely, those conventions that “shape the reader’s expectations, guaranteeing, beyond the language system itself, the predictability of the content, as well as the assumptions and inferences of the reading”<sup>1</sup> (Bertrand 2002: 22). We will reflect not on quantitative data<sup>2</sup> but only on the rhetorical use of scientific, political, and cultural narratives in the social sphere. Starting our investigation with the emergence of the overpopulation’s concept is due to the strategic importance its original construction has in current thinking and practice. In fact, “the synchronic approach to structures does not contradict either the diachronic approach to history or the pragmatic approach to reading”<sup>3</sup> (Bertrand 2002: 22).

Analysis of the texts was preceded by online keyword research, which revealed additional study objects through concordances and original language words linked to the lexeme ‘population’ and its derived lexemes. Malthus and Ehrlich’s texts were considered due to their historical relevance, followed by an analysis of the recent, widely reported, academic debate. In the political field, we identified the most significant trends in the last two decades through web research, including the term’s appearance in the 2020 US presidential campaign. Finally, in the case of terrorists’ texts, we focused on the parts containing the word ‘overpopulation’ and the links between their manifestos.

This article forms an initial exploratory study of the direct evocation of the overpopulation term. It employs historical semantics to highlight the evolution of the term’s meaning. Semiotics, on the other hand, is employed to highlight the term’s synchronic aspects and different uses, based on the premise that “the semiotic analysis of discourses on the environment would consist, first of all, in the identification and denunciation of the veridictory figures, as well as those of the strategies of ignorance”<sup>4</sup> (Fontanille 2018: 67).

## 1. Overpopulation

Since Plato and Aristotle’s time (Feen 1996), the concept of overpopulation entailed diagnosing a social problem, an imbalance, potentially resolved by famine, pestilence, war, and earthquakes. In modern times, overpopulation discourse has spread everywhere; in academic debate, politics, and fiction (Domingo 2015; Clark 2016). From

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<sup>1</sup> Our translation.

<sup>2</sup> Models based on one or more variables relating to “population growth”, such as the recent and emblematic study by Bologna and Aquino (2020), are not analyzed here.

<sup>3</sup> Our translation.

<sup>4</sup> Our translation.

Dickens to Asimov, from Ballard and several other sci-fi authors to Thanos, the villain in the recent Hollywood movie *Avengers: Infinity War* (Newell 2018), who states: “Little one, it’s a simple calculus. This universe is finite. Its resources, finite. If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correction” (Markus).

Natural sciences and urban studies use the term overpopulation to refer to the ‘crowding effect’ as the self-regulative mechanism via which an ecosystem adapts to the animal or plant species supernumeraries (McAdam 2004; Evert 2010). On the other hand, in urban planning, overpopulation involves large metropolitan conglomerates’ high population density—an overcrowding problem in an urban space (Clark 2016).

As a term, overpopulation is based on a familiar word (population), amenable to modifications (e.g., subpopulation), and regularly associated with demography, nature, and human environments. The quantity prefixes do not create a compound word: they only reinforce the idea of ‘population’ - i.e., of “all the people living in a particular country, area, or place” (Cambridge Dictionary) - as is commonly used to indicate a series of undifferentiated units determined by spatial boundaries and temporalization.

Therefore, the term is polysemic; its meaning always dependent on its co-text and its use for different places and populations. To date, some online dictionaries define overpopulation as: “The condition of having a population so dense as to cause environmental deterioration, and impaired quality of life, or a population crash” (Merriam-Webster); “Excessive population of an area to the point of overcrowding, depletion of natural resources, or environmental deterioration” (The Free Dictionary); “Situation in which the number of individuals of a given species exceeds the number that its environment can sustain. Possible consequences are environmental deterioration, impaired quality of life, and a population crash” (Britannica.com); “To fill with an excessive number of people, straining available resources and facilities: Expanding industry has overpopulated the western suburbs” (Dictionary.com). In all these definitions, the word refers to any population that causes a worsening of the living environment. The imbalance concerns the relation between the number of consumers and the environmentally available resources. Only in the last case is the human component explicit as an example of using the word in context. The Cambridge Dictionary instead refers implicitly to the human context, plus comparative examples of use. ‘Overpopulation’ is a noun indicating:

the fact of a country or city, etc., having too many people for the amount of food, materials, and space available there. Overpopulation is one of the country’s most pressing social problems. People are dying because of overpopulation, poverty, and disease. (Cambridge Dictionary)

Although the human condition is not necessary to explain the term’s meaning, some dictionaries focus on the ‘human’ attribute and exclude the ‘non-human.’ It is only the demographic and social sciences that use the technical term ‘relative quantity index’ to refer to any type of living population.



## 2. The origins of the contemporary debate: two fundamental texts

In this section, we take up Fabbri and Latour's invitation "to analyze scientific texts for how they are actually produced" (Fabbri 2000: 260). The modern debate about overpopulation began with Thomas Malthus, in the eighteenth century, to return in vogue with the publication of Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* in 1968. In both cases, public opinion is warned by intellectuals eager to confirm a much older theory: we are too many, there won't be enough resources.

### 2.1. Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population*

Thomas Malthus' *An essay on the principle of the population as it affects the future improvement of society with remarks on the speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and other writers* was published in 1789. Revised repeatedly by the author over the years, the book comprises nineteen chapters. The first seven are devoted to presenting his theory, and the rest in confuting William Godwin and the Marquis de Condorcet's views. Malthus's book forms the cornerstone of the discourse on overpopulation (Tobin 2004: 2), inspiring Darwin's evolution theory (Herbert 1971). He elaborates the concept of overpopulation based on a specific theory of population: "It is an obvious truth, which has

been taken notice of by many writers, that population must always be kept down to the level of the means of subsistence" (Malthus 1798: vii).

Malthus's appeal to self-evident truth ("a proposition so evident that it needs no illustration") and, therefore, to his readers' common sense, is a constant that, combined with the opposition 'control vs. nature', presupposes some social organization/State that acts as a social control body, in the eugenic/positivist sense. He rejects the historical possibility of a civil society free to manage its birth rate ("in no state that we have yet known has the power of population been left to exert itself with perfect freedom"). In this way, a significant opposition running through Malthus's book is 'control vs. nature' (Fig. 1).

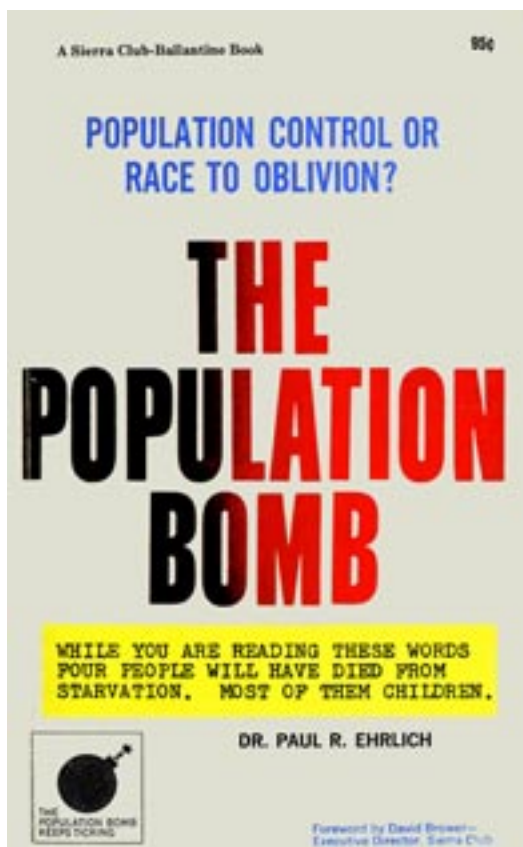


Figure 1. Control vs. Nature

The narrative scheme is quite evident: the population is the object of value, as a superficial semantic component of Greimas's Generative Trajectory, with its unconscious 'growth.' Malthus as the addresser, therefore, turns to the State as a control body (as well as to the reader), while certain anti-addressers (William Godwin and the Marquis de Condorcet) try to refute his analysis. Argumentation proceeds with historical calculations and economic demonstrations aiming to warn about the dangers of a State's failure to prepare for population management.

Among various other evils, overpopulation causes famine, crime, poverty, and war; these are linear consequences of the population exceeding the means of subsistence. 'Natural' population growth increases in a 'geometrical ratio' (by multiplication) – i.e., it doubles from year to year – while the production of food increases in a linear, 'arithmetical ratio' (by addition). Inevitably, then, population growth will quickly outdo the available resources (Malthus 1798: 4).

Posing as an extradiegetic scientific narrator, Malthus presents his thesis following the time's objectivist style. His continual appeals to the 'obvious truth,' familiar to every author, are linked to the impersonal 'having to do' of another subject: the State, whose object of value is the population balance (civilization) vs. overpopulation (= the cruelest rebalancing of nature itself).

Therefore, Malthus appears as an impartial authority, eager to persuade the reader how far the population increases when it grows out of control (unchecked). He presents readers with a precise, scientific formula whose consequences, equally scientific, indicate how to overcome food production's ensuing insufficiency. The State should behave between "preventive checks," such as the moral restraint of postponing marriage, or "positive checks," such as famine, disease, and warfare. Moreover, "the check that represses an increase which is already begun, is confined chiefly, though not perhaps solely, to the lowest orders of society" (Malthus 1798: 23). Performance (as a moment of realization of the State-subject) is given by effective control (positive sanction) or by its complete absence (a sort of *laissez-faire*, the worst solution), which indicates a natural decline of humanity itself (nearly negative sanction, due to the failure of the subject).

This natural inequality of the two powers of population and of production in the earth, and that great law of our nature which must constantly keep their effects equal, form the great difficulty that to me appears insurmountable in the way to the perfectibility of society (Malthus 1798: 5).

Famine is both a misfortune and a solution (a necessary evil), an unpleasant rebalancing produced by humanity's very nature. Therefore, we must understand the idea of a higher authority's control in a social-evolutionary sense. It suggests the idea of a "perfectibility" that shifts the discourse not towards the demonstration of the "obvious

truth” but to social management and control, and more precisely, to State demographic policy and its ability to contain the damage by limiting population.

In Malthus’s scientific discourse, engagement (“I said that population, when unchecked”), impersonal observations (“Let us then”), and appeals to the general public, combine in a paratactic logic that legitimizes historical and anthropological considerations based on hypothetical data and dubious demonstrations. The form of the utterance creates “that particular form of credibility known as ‘referential illusion’” (Bertrand 2002: 63 - 64); the reality-effect which nullifies the distance between the enunciator (the empirical author) and the enunciatee (the empirical reader). This argumentative path intends to be taken as a natural/scientific law, as a precise and far-sighted appeal with progressive objectives, in an evolutionary sense. Notwithstanding Malthus’ later revision of the apocalyptic tones used, it is the path that inspired the current of the neo-Malthusians (Trewavas 2002: 668).

This particular enunciative instance’s foundation lies in enunciative disengagement, using the impersonal typical of objective discourse. From a semantic perspective, Malthus’s text leaps from the natural (living species) to the social context (the human species as an analogy). On the syntactic level, this involves making arbitrary presuppositions inferred, not from a naturalistic description but rhetorical manipulation.

## 2.2. Paul R. Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*

The post-World War II baby boom drew public attention to the global demographic issue. Professor Paul Ehrlich stands out among the diverse organizations and intellectuals concerned about the sudden population increase. A staunch supporter of population control policies, he was responsible, according to Murray Bookchin, for “giving birth to an army of Malthusian population-bombers” (Bookchin 2010: 14).

In tandem with the emergence of the postwar environmental movement (Schreurs 2020: 249-250), Ehrlich proclaims that “overpopulation is now the dominant problem in all our personal, national, and international planning.” Far more alarmist than Malthus’s discourse, Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968) would come to legitimize the so-called neo-Malthusian movement.<sup>55</sup>

I believe that overpopulation is the most important issue facing the world today and that the United States as a world leader should be doing everything in its power to meet it. Starvation is a fact of life in many areas of the world right now and will be worse tomorrow. Every incident of unrest around the world can be traced at least in part to overpopulation, and as the pressures from increased population heighten, so will the unrest. Surely there is no more serious problem (Ehrlich 1968: 212).

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<sup>55</sup> “Well, we wanted something dramatic to start the book,” Erlich stated during a radio interview for climateone.org (KQED Public Radio).

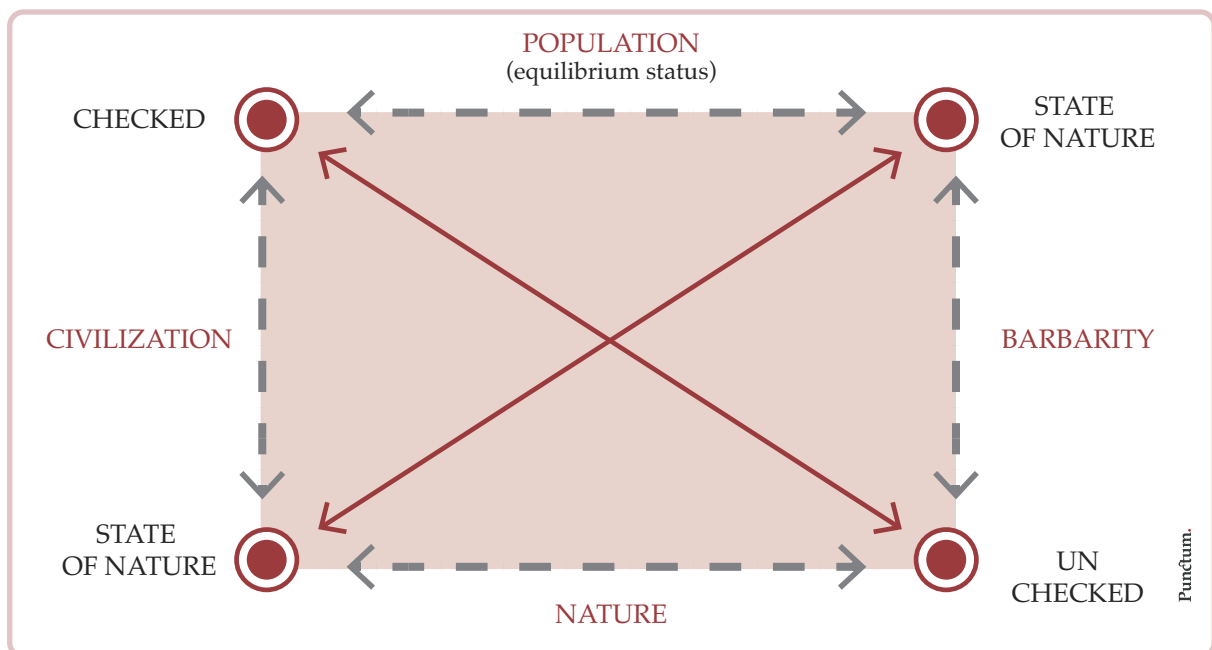


Figure 2. The Population Bomb book cover

The book's title includes a powerful metaphor, reproduced visually in the book's cover, whereby the human population's exponential growth is represented as a bomb (Fig. 2). The metaphor's textual anchoring ("The population bomb keeps ticking") reinforces the idea of an imminent explosion. At the top, the logline emphasizes the tensiveness aspect, the relationship between the lasting element and the terminating element of a process (Greimas 2007: 355): "Population control or race to oblivion?" This race against time can be won through the classical Malthusian solution: population control.<sup>6</sup>

The cover, but also the chapter titles of the book, effectively summarize Ehrlich's appeal: "too many people, too little food," "a dying planet." Beginning by presenting the problem, the chapter titles proceed to indicate its culmination ("the ends of the road"), then to temporalize (Greimas 2007: 354) to the past ("what is being done"), to the future ("what needs to be done") and finally to the present, activating the reader's direct engagement ("what can you do?"). The latter starts right with the book's cover teaser: "While you are reading these words, four people will have died from starvation. Most of them children." The book is not aimed at just a few intellectuals but the wider public. Malthus's thesis is recalibrated: the issue now is to save the entire planet as an object of value. Overpopulation is a global problem demanding the attention of environmental activists, intellectuals, politicians, individuals as well as institutions.

<sup>6</sup> An example of its most authoritarian version: "We should have sent doctors to aid in the program by setting up centers for training para-medical personnel to do vasectomies. Coercion? Perhaps, but coercion in a good cause" (Ehrlich 1968: 165-166).



Unlike Malthus's writings, scientific language is used with a sense of urgency mixed with the disclosure's difficulty. The planetary emergency must be revealed precisely because it is hidden. Ehrlich's prophecy about the future of the planet and humanity is clear: a global famine will break out in less than ten years after the publication of the book. "The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s, the world will undergo famines - hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death despite any crash programs embarked upon now" (Ehrlich 1968: 11). It is no longer a question of State control and 'perfectibility' but of saving humanity and the planet, and everyone is called to participate. Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* adapts to the times and marks the symbolic passage from the national-human question to the demographic-environmental one.

Although the specific prophecy has not come to pass,<sup>7</sup> Ehrlich repeatedly returned to editorial success, most recently with an article titled *The Population Bomb REVISITED* (2009). Here, he admits the fallacy of calculation (inherent in any scientific enterprise) while glorifying his book's ultimately beneficial effect:<sup>8</sup> an early warning about the overpopulation problem (Ehrlich 2009: 69). With Ehrlich, the scientific legitimacy associated with the theory of overpopulation augmented the authority of political discourse (Cedroni 2014: 18) by facilitating the transition from the technical lexicon to political language (Petrilli 2015: 43 - 44).

### 3. On academic debate and its popularization

After Ehrlich, many academic studies appeared either in support of or against the theory of overpopulation. A thorough overview of this vast literature (ranging from ecological studies to economics to anthropology) is beyond this article's scope. Apart from a few selected mentions, our focus will be on the most recent media appearance of explicitly neo-Malthusian visions.

A range of recent studies support<sup>9</sup> overpopulation theory by associating it with climate change and sustainable development (Valentine 2010), the feminist agenda for women's rights (Weld 2012), the challenges of national development (Garg 2017), or international relations (Radavoi 2017). In effect, this scientific literature legitimizes the institutions and authors associated with the overpopulation cause. Significantly, the overpopulation issue is often characterized as taboo, a keyword that retains its impact in the scientific field.

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<sup>7</sup> About the failure of Malthusian theories in those years, see the analysis concerning the 'Green Revolution' (Flachs 2016).

<sup>8</sup> It's useful to recall social psychologist Leon Festinger's observation: "Here once again we note the appearance of increased enthusiasm and conviction after a disconfirmation" (Festinger et al. 1956: 16).

<sup>9</sup> In environmental humanities, there is no direct support to the overpopulation theory; however, it can be considered an issue to take seriously (Clark 2016).

At the recent United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25, 2019) in Madrid, one panel was entitled *Overpopulation & Climate Change: A Seat at the Table* (Facing Future 2020). The presentation of the speakers included multimedia support with syncretic texts. During the debate, a world map was used to illustrate how the population, from homo sapiens to the present day, has spread worldwide. The first speaker proposed a graph showing a parallelism between population growth and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (which increase climate change). Other multimedia items were scattered throughout the conference: an infographic on the personal impact of significant choices to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, in which choosing “one fewer child in the developed world” is equivalent to “58.6 tons”, compared to “2.4 tons” for the choice of “don’t own a car.” Once again assuming the form of truthful discourse (“the core problem at the heart of us to all the planet’s environmental challenges”), whose opacity grounds the idea of overpopulation, the accusation is that the issue has been removed (“never cited”) from the list of things to do to resolve the ecological crisis (Facing Future 2020).

Other non-scientific materials reinforced the speakers’ message: hyperbole in a comic strip that suggests a planet with overcrowded lands,<sup>10</sup> synecdoches in a documentary film on Chinese metropolises, the simile of a man running on a treadmill as a predictive formula. Following Ehrlich’s failed prophecy, the proof offered is in all cases modeled in terms of recurrence and urgency:

Now, when I think about this issue of consumption versus population, I like to go back to the metaphor that Paul Ehrlich proposed. And he said, you look - This whole environmental impact, this carbon footprint is a rectangle and it may not be entirely sure whether the long side of the rectangle is consumption, or maybe it’s population, but the size of the rectangle stays the same. (Facing Future 2020)

From world hunger to climate change, Ehrlich’s analysis remained the standard reference point for sustainability issues. All the speakers asked for a seat at the table to ensure that these dramatic events’ fundamental problems remained on the agenda.

The second speaker referred to naturalist studies and, using images of various species, focused on the parallelism between the animal and human kingdoms.

We must not only reduce our consumption but we must reduce our numbers. They are connected. If we keep ignoring this exponential population rise that has put us in severe ecological overshoot, Nature will reduce the human population for us [...] we’re dying of an excess of political correctness. It continues to impede the truth as we tend to try to be careful rather than correct. Our overpopulation activists, including myself, are falsely accused of sinister agen-

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<sup>10</sup> On the web, there are many journalistic cartoons on this theme. They use either the isotopy of the ascending graph, as a ‘human wave,’ or with the same meaning of urgency implied by Ehrlich’s bomb, with clocks and the onomatopoeic timing ‘tick!’

das while our numbers spin out of control on our limited planet. (Facing Futures 2020)

The theme of the Malthusian “positive checks” returns here, as well as the idea that nature will make up for the inactivity of the States (a synonym of the collective ‘we’ in this narrative). There is also a well-defined anti-addresser, acting against the “truth” proposed by the neo-Malthusians: political correctness.<sup>11</sup> It is a fascinating rhetorical tool that connects the scientific approach (description) to the political question tout court (solutions). Of course, it is undervalued correctness, short-sighted and deaf to the scientific appeal of the neo-Malthusians.

The last speaker, based on Jevons’ paradox,<sup>12</sup> outlined an anthropological picture of humanity being unable to control its consumerist impulses, suggesting an economic-utilitarian reduction in which “family planning is essential” (as a possibility for women to “prevent or avoid”):

People want, will want to increase their consumption of meat products as described in the literature. When people get a little bit more extra money in their pockets, one of the first things they do is consume animal products. (Facing Future 2020)

The ‘alarmist’ model links the quantitative phenomenon (only numbers matter) to the human population (institutions are asked to do something about it, rather than develop sustainability policies). Given that the veridiction issue is based on the opposition between ‘appearing’ and ‘being’ (Bertrand 2002: 151), the quantitative demonstration merges with a narrative based on secrecy (overpopulation does not seem a problem but, in reality, it is) and on the others’ lies (we seem to be guided by “sinister agendas,” but we proclaim the “truth,” hampered by “political correctness”). Co-host Regina Valdez effectively summarizes this in her conclusive metaphor: “the elephant in the room that no one discusses is these overpopulation issues.” A formulation that links the idea of the ‘secret’ (what is but does not seem to be) to the idea of an ‘inconvenient truth,’ at times visible (for political elites) and at times invisible (to public opinion).

The semiotic assembly of infographics on exponential demographic growth configures visually the credibility of the data collected by the neo-Malthusians. Originating in the academic sector, the ‘inconvenient truth’ about overpopulation passes on to popular science publications (Juniper 2018: 16-17). The overpopulation thesis is supported in a manual on adverse environmental impact facts (Juniper 2018: 16-23), where the same infographics are accompanied by ecological vocabulary (“population ex-

<sup>11</sup> “...we not die of political correctness. We have overcome many religious tenets that are stuck in the Dark Ages, and, as a naturalist, it’s adapt or die. And this is part of adaptation; we must change our rules and our ideas of what the future can bring based on cultural norms” (Facing Future 2020).

<sup>12</sup> The Jevons paradox concerns how a given resource’s higher production efficiency (lower costs) leads to a greater demand for it. Regarding the validity of this theory, see Richard York and Julius Alexander McGee 2015.

plosion') and expressions inherited from Ehrlich ('demographic time bomb'). However, the national population's myths are contradicted by the different average consumption of individuals or the variables of class, origin, gender, social distribution of resources, and production ethics, as critics of the neo-Malthusian theory point out.

From a syntactic point of view, therefore, the neo-Malthusian discourse envisages the revealing of scientific truth, differing only superficially from Ehrlich's political-alarmist model. This return to 'truth,' to the need to face the problem, provides a state of visibility guaranteed by visual elements (such as infographics and maps) and an "alarming" figurative component (such as bombs and waves).

An equally vast academic literature has developed, accusing neo-Malthusians of skewed calculations and collusion with conservative worldviews. Starting by problematizing or refuting neo-Malthusian data, academic criticism ends up denouncing their instrumental use. For example, Fletcher examines the construction of the "overpopulation scapegoat" (Fletcher et al. 2014); Hendrixon highlights the manipulative use of overpopulation by international relations narratives (Hendrixon 2018); Bettini shows how neo-Malthusian narratives are employed to turn climate refugees into national threats and depoliticize global climate change governance (Bettini 2013), and Dyett denounces the overpopulation discourse as a rhetorical tool for the suppression of certain populations and marginalized communities (Dyett 2019). Still, others highlight, for example, the abuse of a technical term "for the ends of the few over the hopes of the many" (Ross 2000: 1). Seidl and Tisdell suggest that the concept of "carrying capacity" does not apply to socio-economic issues (Seidl 1998).

These are just a few examples of counter-Malthusian publications, many of which focus on how neo-Malthusians reduce overpopulation to a single variable or limit the discussion regarding production, distribution, and consumption. For example, they level the climate impact between rich and poor, first and third world, women and men).<sup>13</sup> In the extra-academic field, Pope Francesco's *Laudato si'* (2015: 45 - 46) is the most recent and famous example of this approach (in a pronatalist sense). Another example of pop-criticism is the website [overpopulation.world](http://overpopulation.world). It highlights the neo-Malthusian perspective's partiality, basing its infographic demonstration on the demographic transition theory (Kurzgesagt).

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<sup>13</sup> "Despite formidable and compelling criticism, it continues to produce in the West and among Western-influenced elites unremitting anxiety about 'over-population. However, its greatest achievement has been to provide an enduring argument for the prevention of social and economic change and to obscure, in both academic and popular thinking, the real roots of poverty, inequality, and environmental deterioration. [...] The Malthusian argument has consistently overwhelmed other explanations of poverty. Malthusian famine scenarios have systematically distracted attention from the fact that it is not people's reproductive habits that are the principal source of most of the misuse or waste of the world's resources, but the contradictions and motives of capitalist development. This briefing aims to show that today's debates about such issues as welfare, the minimum wage, and immigration continue to be influenced by obscurantist Malthusian arguments which reaffirm the privileges of the few over the hopes of the many." (Ross 2000: 1)

Overpopulation theory supporters claim to illuminate a generally forgotten question, obscured either by impersonal enunciation (i.e., there is no talk of overpopulation) or abstract anti-subjects (i.e., ‘political correctness’). On the other hand, the theory’s critical investigation involves the continual interrogation of neo-Malthusian arguments and data. As a rule, criticism takes the form: <subject (S1) omits/reduces/enhances something (O)>. Therefore, the accumulation of secondary narrative programs in a text, and the different objects of value considered in an intertextual sense, work to disperse the effects of criticism.

Both sides of the debate exhibit an attitude of parrhesia and disclosure and a sliding to political discourse. A kind of discourse that, according to Fabbri, is never merely ‘representational.’

[Political discourse] cannot be described as a set of utterances in a cognitive relationship with reality. It must be considered *a discourse in the field*, destined to call and respond, dissuade and convince; a discourse of men to transform men and relationships between men, not just a medium for reproducing reality.<sup>14</sup> (Fabbri 1985)

Overpopulation is a ‘technical’ term in the field of natural sciences. Still, it becomes problematic when used in political discourse (Petrilli 2015: 19) and urban micro-politics (i.e., concerning metropolises or megalopolises), and even more so in the macro-political debates on the global population and the planet. Vazquez reminds us that “at the heart of the ensuing conflicts is the impossibility of definitively casting the issue of overpopulation as an exclusively natural/biological problem instead of a social/cultural problem” (2019: 39).

Therefore, the transition from the natural to the social sciences can not be said to have been resolved. The politicization of the issue derives precisely from carrying over the debate to the social sciences. On the other hand, the neo-Malthusian rhetoric does not consider the dialogue between human and natural sciences, the importance of which is today more evident than ever before (Latour 2020). Critics from both the natural and the social sciences are instead annoyed by the wear and tear of “negative communication” (Cosenza 2012) arising from neo-Malthusianism.

#### 4. From political debate to eco-fascist discourse

The political debate on overpopulation, driven by the need to ‘set limits,’ always focuses on the importance of control. Today, this control is limited to women’s rights (e.g., policies on birth and abortion rights). Assertions about overpopulation in the political

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<sup>14</sup> Our translation.



sphere resurface from time to time. Among the most direct and long-winded ones is a press article (October 25, 2007) by the current British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, then Mayor of London. The article's title - *Global overpopulation is the real issue* -, rephrased at its end - "the real number one issue," sums up his case. Johnson (2007) perceives overpopulation as the primary cause of global warming and is solvable only by birth control.

Johnson overviews vast areas of high population density from a zenith perspective: "You can see it as you fly over Africa at night, and you see mile after mile of fires burning red in the dark, as the scrub is removed to make way for human beings." In this way, he adopts the conspiracy angle characterizing overpopulation supporters: "I simply cannot understand why no one discusses this impending calamity, and why no world statesmen have the guts to treat the issue with the seriousness it deserves." In line with neo-Malthusianism, he takes population growth to simply mean more consumers. Adopting the idea of an almost forgotten but crucial and as yet unsolved problem, Johnson accuses politicians of "political cowardice" about overpopulation<sup>15</sup> a taboo term for both right and left politics

But over the years, the argument changed, and certain words became taboo, and certain concepts became forbidden. We have reached the stage where the very discussion of overall human fertility – global motherhood – has become more or less banned. (Johnson 2007)

Overpopulation is a term effectively excluded from contemporary democratic debate. It resurfaced timidly in the 2020 US presidential campaign. On January 21, 2020, at the World Economic Forum, Trump declared:

To embrace the possibilities of tomorrow, we must reject the perennial prophets of doom and their predictions of the Apocalypse. They are the heirs of yesterday's foolish fortune tellers, and they want to see us do badly, but we won't let that happen. They predicted an overpopulation crisis in the 1960s, mass starvation in the 70s, and the end of oil in the 1990s. These alarmists always demand the same thing: absolute power to dominate, transform, and control every aspect of our lives. (Morano 2020)

During a rally in Conway, South Carolina, to the related question on overpopulation and climate change, Trump's opponent, Joe Biden, answers: "It's the first time population is not growing," a position that immediately turns into an appeal for women's rights (WCNC 2020).

Overpopulation is a demographic concept that adding a quantitative estimate to the term 'population' implies an ideal population balance and a concomitant survival

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<sup>15</sup> Here is an excerpt: "Isn't it time politicians stopped being so timid, and started talking about the real number one issue?" (Johnson 2007).

threshold. A true masterpiece of the art of academic rhetoric. The term, based on the axes of the self-excluding lexemes, such as ‘growth’ and ‘decline,’<sup>16</sup> whose frame of reference is scientific-political, or rather descriptive-normative, strongly depends on its veridictive the premise: ‘we need to admit it.’ In public debate, the problem is not denied but removed as not-now or not-after, not concurrence (Greimas 2007: 71).

Although there is much talk about the need to politicize scientific discourse, we cannot yet discuss the significance of the term overpopulation in political debate (Zehner 2012). In the latter case, it remains an implicit term, used to discuss something else or less controversial ‘preventive checks,’ like contraception or women’s education. Also, it can introduce into political discourse an apocalyptic tone or, alternately, be condemned as a false apocalypse. The association between overpopulation and apocalypse is a recurrent phenomenon, despite the emergence of new technologies capable of bringing food production in line with population growth (Trewavas 2002).

In these discourses, ‘overpopulation’ becomes an anti-subject that limits the economy, or a pretext to talk about something else, such as women’s rights.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, nationalist discourse can evoke the overpopulation theory, mixed with conspiracy theories (for example, the Kalergi Plan conspiracy theory).

Thus, in 2014, Jean-Marie Le Pen suggested that Ebola could solve the “global ‘population explosion’ and, by extension, Europe’s ‘immigration problem’” (Willsher 2014). The nationalists have transformed the aphorism ‘we are too many’<sup>18</sup> into ‘they are too many,’ aiming to distinguish between two populations: the native, targeted by pronatalism rhetoric, and the foreign, targeted by exclusionary policies (Hendrixon 2018: 8).

#### 4.1. Terrorism

From the removal of foreigners to their elimination is but a short step. This is a striking example of how the theme of overpopulation works as a pretext to talk about something else. This section will briefly consider the eco-fascist perspective on the overpopulation issue, based on three far-right terrorists’ manifestos. The first is *2083: A European Declaration of Independence* by Anders Behring Breivik (see 2011).

<sup>16</sup> So, the term ‘subpopulation’ is equally effective, always regarding heterogeneous spatial contexts (neighborhoods, cities, areas, nations, the world).

<sup>17</sup> The democratic position uses overpopulation as a pretext to introduce women’s rights issues: a woman ‘must be able to do’ whatever she wants with her body. In Trump’s speech, overpopulation is a bugbear: woman as a passive subject (‘cannot do’) for external coercion (she ‘cannot be forced to’ i.e., have only one child). The Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker, the State Department said it was dropping the funding on the U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA) because it “supports, or participates in the management of a program of coercive abortion or involuntary sterilization.” - Nichols 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Recently intersected with the COVID pandemic and the slogan “we are the virus” (see Newton 2020).

Still, there are pockets of resistance. Professor Sigurd Skirbekk at the University of Oslo questions many of the assumptions underlying Western immigration policies. One of them is the notion that rich countries have a duty to take in all people from other nations that suffer, either from natural disasters, political repression, or overpopulation. According to him, it cannot be considered moral of the cultural, political, and religious elites of these countries to allow their populations to grow unrestrained and then push their excess population onto other countries. (Breivik 2011)

Breivik turns to academic sources to legitimize his anti-immigration views and denounces all kinds of elites as promoters of mass migration to more affluent countries. The element of conspiracy theory is again present: this time, it is the environmentalists that suppress the truth about overpopulation: "Environmentalism - obsession with global warming instead of focusing on overpopulation (no calls for birth/population control in the developing world)" (Breivik 2011). Just as in the mainstream political debate, the overpopulation issue is used to talk about something else. The refugee/immigration issue and the "white genocide" (Davey 2019: 7) presumably carried out by "Cultural Marxism/multiculturalism" and "political correctness" (von Brömssen 2013: 19-20).

The second manifesto is *The Great Replacement* by Brenton Tarrant. In this case, too, overpopulation theory is used to deal with another question; once again, immigration.

Why focus on immigration and birth rates when climate change is such a huge issue? Because they are the same issue, the environment is being destroyed by overpopulation, we Europeans are one of the groups that are not overpopulating the world. The invaders are the ones overpopulating the world. Kill the invaders, kill the overpopulation, and by doing so, save the environment. [...] There is no Green future with never-ending population growth; the ideal green world cannot exist in a World of 100 billion, 50 billion, or even 10 billion people. Continued immigration into Europe is environmental warfare and ultimately destructive to nature itself. (Tarrant)

Patrick Crusius's manifesto, *The Inconvenient Truth About Me*, takes up the right-wing rhetoric on 'invasion' and 'ethnic replacement,' referring directly to Tarrant's text.

In general, I support the Christchurch shooter and his manifesto. This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas. They are the instigators, not me. I am simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion. [...] My motives for this attack are not at all personal. Actually, the Hispanic community was not my target before I read *The Great Replacement*. This manifesto will cover the political and economic reasons behind the attack, my gear, my expectations of what response this will generate, and my personal motivations and thoughts. (Crusius)

There is no natural process of population growth (e.g., encouraged by development), but rather the intention of some 'secret' governmental or social entities to move from one subject (i.e., the refugee/migrant) to another (i.e., the 'white race'). The 'planned invasion' is yet another conspiracy theory integral to far-right and eco-fascist discourses. It is a vocabulary that intends to insinuate itself into ecological discourse, prioritizing the elimination of 'invaders' as a solution to the environmental crisis (Tarrant).

The use of the impersonal to validate pseudo-scientific statements alternates with the first person and performative verbs to underline the actions excluded from the democratic field (famines, war, pandemics, and sterilization). Taking direct measures for population control, terrorists appear as heroic *vigilantes*, single-handedly challenging 'cosmopolitan culture' from their distorted eco-fascist perspective. The recurring mythic pattern of national-populist culture reinforces the overpopulation argument with mythic imagery's intrusion (Turpin 2006).

## 5. The overpopulation discourse, demography, and political sciences

The term overpopulation's semantic polysemy is due to the different meanings it assumes in different ecosophies, academic disciplines, and policy areas (Tobin 2004). Considered apart from its diverse uses, it becomes problematic as the quantitative prefix loses its descriptive instrumentality. Overpopulation is a nearly atopic issue of debate, a political slogan that slides from the legislative arena to the daily discussion with phrases like 'the earth (or the nation) is full,' or 'we (or they) are too many.' The appeal to science aims to persuade than to describe. Overpopulation is seen as a real problem (or, conversely, a false problem) when debated in the global political sphere, connected to the world environmental crisis. Therefore, the delimitation of space (i.e., city or planet) is vital in understanding the controversy's specific character and stakes. It is also crucial in understanding when the myth of original homogeneity comes into play (Turpin 2006).

The affirmation of a state of overpopulation is also an essential premise for the future's temporal expectation, confirming a systematic "lack of historical perspective" in neo-Malthusian discourse (Aligica 2009: 75) politicizing the planetary framework. The speakers at the COP25 Conference use the complex term 'population' (Fig. 1) in the debate to show a subject in equilibrium but precarious when the temporalization focuses on the future. Painting the future in apocalyptic tones is based on hypothetical models and narratives (Kaplan 1994). To quantify and contextualize elements involves a moment of transformation or performance that adds the idea of *danger*, a pathemic dimen-

sion typical of the populist rhetoric (Cedroni 2014: 41) based on *fear*. It offers more legitimacy to the narrator's competence and less to the public's: there is a state of pressing urgency, and it is essential to listen to the call.

Another fundamental aspect concerns the theme of top-down control. There is a natural transition from neo-Malthusian to authoritarian discourse based on narrative syntax and meaning structures involving the 'secret' or excessive use of the nominative case, typical of right-wing culture (Jesi 2011: 287). In this case, overpopulation is a word-myth that requires no explanation; its evocation involves two simple elements: quantity and people. Its atopic sense and pressing urgency are enough to make it understandable. By evoking a lateral discourse, it becomes a keyword for the activation or deactivation of control policies (coercion, family planning) on citizens' bodies and the legitimation or delegitimation of refugee/migrant life.<sup>19</sup> It is, therefore, above all a question of delimiting the space of its appearance. It is the fundamental association/prescription based on a calculation that poses the "population problem in economic terms" (Murphy 2017: 205). A slippery concept is used to qualify a population that has become an integral whole, passive, and malleable. A reification that transforms "a human subject into an object" (Greimas 2007: 274).

The isotopy of 'overcrowded' recurs in journalism and academia, particularly in visual form. Its visual figurations evidence how the spatial dimension is connected to the human collectivity's figure. The whole confined in a restricted space is the essence of overpopulation. The public diffusion and resonance of the concept, on the other hand, make its explanation superfluous. Paraphrasing Malthus, overpopulation is evident to all: what it is and what needs to be done.

For a long time, demography, by "declaring itself an intellectual activity with no connection to policy and politics and developing its identity as a highly quantitative and mathematical field" (Greenhalgh 2009: 30-31), has been associated with the Malthusian language. In recent times, however, the latter has evolved. There is a renewed discourse on overpopulation, a policy-oriented discourse in the neo-Malthusian sense, whose effectiveness is related to the following distinctive elements:

- the importance of the actantial disengagement, third-person scientific character;
- the simplistic algebraization of human impact tout court;
- the polemic as spatial expansion increases;
- the state of emergency and the necessity for control;
- the thematization of the future as apocalyptic;
- the importance of referential illusion in scientific-political communication.

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<sup>19</sup> It is worth pursuing the further investigation of the relationship between overpopulation and the 'people' as "alternating synecdoche" (Cedroni 2014: 56).



The last point is fundamental if we consider the political discourse's vocabulary on the subject of future sustainability (Latour 2020: 395). What we are dealing with here is the renegotiation of the semantic value of terms that "can be defined as the exploitation of the semantic vagueness of words"<sup>20</sup> (Petrilli 2015: 27-28). The neo-Malthusian discourse forces upon its critics the problem of veridiction. If the problem of political discourse, therefore, concerns "questioning the referential uniqueness of the terms in favor of a different interpretation"<sup>21</sup> (Petrilli 2015: 29), the rejected term 'overpopulation' becomes a secret to be unveiled; when affirmed, it coincides with the modality "what modifies the predicate" (Greimas 2007: 202), a "speech act" (Cedroni 2014: 13), or simply, how we do (political) things with words.

The fundamental point in analyzing the political language on overpopulation is to consider the political dimension as "a power effect," or as "the transformation of the modal competences of the parties involved in political communication and, subsequently, the transformation of the conditions for carrying out their respective action programs"<sup>22</sup> (Landowski 2003: 275). Hence, we need to start from the discursive structures considered and the modalities invested in them.

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<sup>20</sup> Our translation.

<sup>21</sup> Our translation.

<sup>22</sup> Our translation.

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