

Conceivable Futures

[Marcin Smietana](#), March '17

Throughout my life I have met very few people to explicitly tell me that they considered not having children because there were too many people on the planet – or, somewhat less abruptly, because they would have felt uneasy about bringing a child into the world of climate change and the resulting conflicts around shrinking planetary resources. I suspect a colleague of mine or two may have considered it more or less theoretically, but I'd risk the hypothesis that in most of my social circles, if anyone pronounced statements of this kind, they would be looked at with a mixture of misunderstanding and amusement: those things tend to be left to governments and global organizations, if at all.



Photo 01: Growing human populations have long been entering animal habitats (here in Canada). [Source](#).

(De-)extinction in the Anthropocene

Recently, both human reproduction (due to the resulting population growth) and human consumption (because of its currently unsustainable styles) have repeatedly been quoted as the main reasons for the ongoing climate change and extinction of animal species. Several alarming reports of animal extinction have hit the headlines. The 2016 Worldwide Wildlife Fund's ['Living Planet' report](#) has shown that since 1970s, wildlife populations have declined by 58%, and by 2020 this number will further decline to 67% unless urgent action is taken. This means that the world has lost half its wildlife in only half a century! Currently one in six species worldwide [faces extinction](#), mirrored by one in seven in the UK, according to the 2016 ['State of Nature' report](#). It is feared that by the end of the century a half of the planet's animal species will have

[become extinct](#). This ['Biological Extinction'](#), notably in the context of human birth control, has even become the subject of a conference convened at the end of February 2017 by Pope Francis in the Vatican. The mass extinction of animal species has been attributed to human activity, in the form of the loss and degradation of animal habitats, over-hunting and over-fishing, pollution and climate change, and introduction of non-native invasive species. The scale of the recent human impact on the animal realm and the environment has been so unprecedented that scientists have been proposing the geological epoch of the Holocene should now be replaced by the name of ['the Anthropocene'](#). Curiously, the 'biological extinction' is a double-edged process, whereby the recent finale of the modernist project of human control of nature has simultaneously given rise to new possibilities such as re-wilding or [de-extinction](#), as recently shown by [Carrie Friese](#) and discussed further here below.



Photo 02: A koala in its deforested former habitat. [Source](#).

Reproductive futures for whom?

['Cloning wildlife'](#) and even more so, 'cloning climate' may still be viewed by many as too far-fetched projects, that's why in New Hampshire on the east US coast, a handful of people who consider their reproductive futures with regard to the environment have set up their own association. They couldn't have come up with a more telling name than ['Conceivable Future'](#). The organization reunites activists set on a struggle against the climate change and the corporate fossil fuel industries in the US and elsewhere – with a view to creating a world to which they would feel they could bring their future children into. 'The climate crisis is a reproductive justice crisis,' they declare, 'how do you decide to have a baby when opportunities for leading a healthy and productive life are increasingly jeopardized?' In a similar vein, the first such voices have also appeared in the [British public debate](#), however unnoticed and dismissed they seem to have gone so far. Their contemporary language, like in 'Conceivable Future,' is focused on the climate change. Related concerns with the population growth have also been expressed by contemporary British associations such as [Population Matters](#). A more extreme outlook has been proposed by the

[Voluntary Human Extinction Movement](#) in the US, which, however, does not seem to have gone mainstream.

Reproductive justice is still often reserved for the human species though. As shown by the above reports, half the animal species are bound to become extinct in the coming 80 years, unless extremely urgent and influential action is taken. Meanwhile, if animals reproduce too much from the human viewpoint and cause conflict to farming and other human activities, their populations are reduced by selective killing – of which some much discussed recent examples are the [badger cull in the UK](#), or the [wolf cull in Finland](#), among many others. The food industry routinely uses assisted reproductive technologies for industrial reproduction of farm animals, notably of females in dairy and egg industries, and industrial farming has fallen under extreme critique on the part of numerous [animal rights organizations](#), who often point to scientific proofs of animal sentience. Perhaps that's why when after a recent animal rights event in Cambridge I explained to some vegan activists that I was working on reproductive technologies, their immediate response was to challenge me by declaring 'we are anti-natalists here'...



Photo 03: The view from Greenwich in London as pollution hangs over the city. [Source](#).

(How) does population matter?

Demographic predictions of the human precedence on the planet are indeed stunning: from 2.5 billion people on Earth in 1950, the world population has now reached almost 7.5, and it is bound to increase to over 11 billion in 2100, according to the [UN World Population Prospects](#). It is estimated that every day some 360,000 babies are born on Earth, while 150,000 people die daily – which gives the impressive over [200,000 new globe inhabitants daily](#)! This could correspond to an entire sizeable city or town, such as an Aberdeen, a Northampton, a Swansea, or a Salt Lake City added daily to the planet. Not so much in Europe, which is one of the few regions of the world where in several countries the population is bound to shrink. This decline, due to the current social security structure as well as ideas of the nation, is approached by some in an alarmist tone. Yet from the viewpoint of one planetary space to be shared by different species, such a decline in human population could be approached as a blessing, particularly given Europe's exaggerated consumption patterns.

Ideas of human population control in response to the shrinking resources are not new, and they were already pronounced two centuries ago by [Thomas Malthus](#). They took new force in the neo-Malthusian movement of the 1950s and 60s. Notably, biologist [Paul Ehrlich](#) of Stanford University of California recommended wider use of birth control to halt population growth in his loud book 'Population Bomb' – yet it should not be forgotten that the population control as he framed it could easily be used to justify selective eugenics and reproductive injustice aimed at certain populations. With a general awareness of these possible dangers, environmentalists have been taking over many of the neo-Malthusian concerns rather cautiously over the last decades.

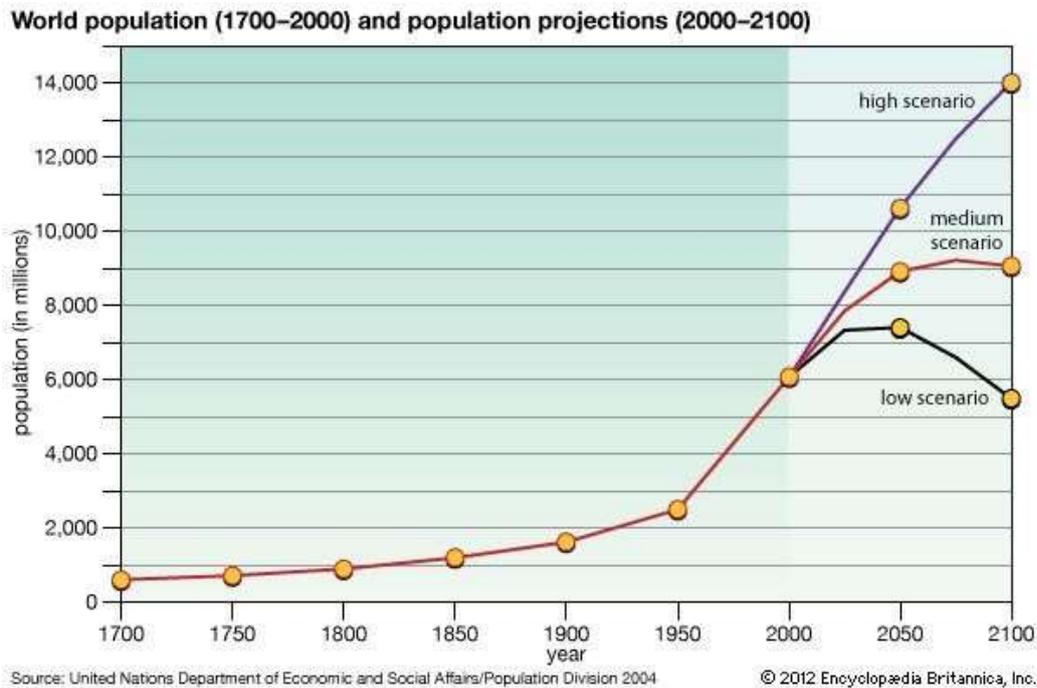


Photo 04: Growth of human population on Earth. [Source](#).

Diversities in the age of biological control

Control of population and reproduction may too easily become anti-human, inhumane, or hostile towards a certain category of humans. Thus it is often rightly perceived with a justified dose of suspicion. Overlooking social inequalities and discrimination does sometimes become an issue for some otherwise formidable activists in the animal rights and, perhaps less so, environmental movements. At the other end of the scale are also some well-known examples of ethnicity-based eugenics aimed at certain human populations, as exemplified by the [forced sterilization](#) of indigenous and Latina women in the US or [Peru](#). Negative stereotyping may also happen in the current debate on population and the environment, where Africa may be pointed at in a negative way given that according to predictions its population is bound to grow much more than that of the other continents.

From a totally different standpoint, one could question all pro-animal and pro-environmental considerations by a simple statement that biodiversity may not necessarily have to be an advantage. Fortunately for the sake of animals though, scientists have long stated that although not all biodiversity change is necessarily negative, [biodiversity](#) per se is favourable for the climate,

planet, and humans. In any case, the desirability or otherwise of a biodiverse environment is now for us to decide and seal by a social contract, as in the current 'age of biological control,' biodiversity will not just impose itself through any 'natural law' any more. As shown by [Sarah Franklin](#), today the very notion that something is biologically impossible has gone extinct. Echoing the pioneer of cloning, Ian Wilmut, Franklin notes that given the available combinations of biology and technology, it's up to us how we choose to re-engineer biology – and, by extension, we would add echoing Carrie Friese, re-engineer biodiversity.

The overwhelming choice (not very successful though as yet) has been to try to protect biodiversity, since the 1992 global [Convention on Biological Diversity](#), in the UK followed by [governmental](#) and [non-governmental](#) actions. The first fascinating rewilding initiatives have followed suit, such as re-introducing [beavers](#) and [dormice](#) in the UK – however contested some of them still are by [farmers](#), thus revealing the underlying conflict between reproduction of humans and reproduction of animals.



Photo 05: These beavers, luckier than culled badgers in the same country, are experimentally re-introduced to the British countryside. [Source](#).

Bio-social justice?

I don't know whether I'll decide to 'make kin, not babies' in line with the pro-environmental calls for inter-species kinship by [Donna Haraway](#) or [Kim TallBear](#). I could as well seek kinship with 'families we choose' among my friends and lovers, as described by [Kath Weston](#) in San Francisco's queer communities of the late '80s. Like the environmentalists in [Katie Dow](#)'s ethnography of the Scottish Spey Bay, I could also try to 'make a good life' through a more nuanced approach of considering the environment and its species in every action I take, yet understandingly not excluding the options for my own and others' reproduction. Within my circumstances, it's for me to decide. To decide, because in the end there seems to be no such stable reference point as a 'natural way of reproduction,' as well shown by scholars to date. Gracious reminders of this can be seen all around us across time and space: for instance, my grandfather had 10 siblings and my grandmother had 5. Then new social circumstances came and my parents were born in two- or three-child families, to which my two siblings have followed suit. Thus as an alternative to reproduction, I may as well just focus on production (if the two can still be separated at all) - I can like a funpage of a local environmental association to get updates in support of my daily low-impact consumption, buy local food, not take a plane to a conference... But for sure as a sociologist I will expect myself and my colleagues to take the questions of 'biological extinction'

and 'conceivable futures' very seriously in our work. As a kind of radar to orient my work – as much affective as scholarly - I would imagine some kind of 'bio-social justice,' where biodiversity would take precedence over some form of 'bionationalism'. This does not mean, of course, that this process or biodiversity itself can escape the pitfalls and opportunities of its inherently social origins...



Photo 06: The story of pig Esther – a farm pig who became a home pet - highlights how the conceivability of certain futures is a social convention. [Source](#).

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