

WHO'S TOO MUCH?

Commonalities, Mobilisation and Persistence of Malthusian Framings

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Abstract

This doctoral research interrogates a fundamental paradox: why does Malthusian thinking persist as a governing logic despite centuries of empirical refutation. Through four empirical studies spanning Dutch population policy, EU migration governance, climate (im)mobilities discourse, and historical genealogies of population control, I develop 'Malthusianisation' as an analytical framework explaining how diverse social anxieties become persistently channelled through demographic explanations. The research reveals that Malthusianisation operates through seven interlocking mechanisms: double-sided discourse combining technocratic rationality with racialised fear; affective mobilisation governing through emotion; temporal manipulation creating perpetual crisis; scientific legitimisation through simplified models; naturalisation of political conflicts as demographic inevitabilities; coalitional breadth through progressive confusion; and institutional resilience ensuring bureaucratic reproduction. A crucial eighth mechanism emerges through examining Ibn Khaldun's systematic erasure from demographic thought: epistemic foreclosure, whereby Malthusian frameworks maintain dominance by suppressing alternative genealogies that would reveal their contingency. Drawing on Foucauldian biopolitics, critical demography, decolonial theory, feminist political ecology, and affect studies, the research introduces two key concepts. 'Malthusianisation' names the discursive, affective, and institutional process that renders population problematisations persistent and enduring, transforming structural outcomes of political, economic, and ecological systems into demographic 'problems' requiring management. 'Ethnomorphosis' captures how demographic anxieties selectively racialise populations, converting ethnic identities into figures of demographic threat through seemingly neutral technical language. Methodologically, the research integrates Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to Be' approach with Schultz's Malthusian matrix, develops systematic affective analysis tracking emotional orchestration across policy documents, and operationalises 'epistemic refusal' as a stance declining complicity with colonial knowledge systems. Most radically, engaging Indigenous feminist epistemologies, particularly Cuerpo-Territorio, I propose redefining 'population' not as statistical abstraction but as embodied territorial sovereignty, communities constituted through ancestral relations where body-territory severance constitutes ontological violence. The findings demonstrate how contemporary governance deploys demographic reasoning to deflect from structural causes. Each study reveals how Malthusianisation forecloses transformative politics by rendering political-economic outcomes as population 'problems'. Yet the research documents actually-existing alternatives: Indigenous governance maintaining abundance through relational protocols; Cuerpo-Territorio movements asserting body-territory inseparability; reproductive justice frameworks centring care over calculation. These demonstrate that demographic governance only functions where communities accept reduction to population categories. This work reveals Malthusian persistence as active reproduction through mechanisms making alternatives unthinkable. As demographic reasoning increasingly shapes responses to political, economic, and ecological transformations - determining who lives, dies, moves, remains, reproduces - understanding these mechanisms becomes urgent. The research points toward futures organised through relations of care, reciprocity, and territorial accountability rather than biopolitical calculation.