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Climate change, reproductive justice, and existential politics: examining histories and implications of neo-Malthusianism in the U.S. environmental movement

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Abstract

Climate change is the greatest public health threat of our time. The impacts of climate change exacerbates inequities not only among nations but also within societies. Climate action may be seen as an existential threat by political leaders and elites whose power and wealth is derived from fossil fuel-related economic activity and may push them to seek ‘solutions’ to climate change that do not require a shift away from fossil fuels, such as population control measures. The U.S. environmental movement and international NGO apparatus have a dark history of advocating for neo-Malthusian or adjacent approaches to population growth, including coercive population control measures. These approaches resulted in policies that violated reproductive justice and disproportionately affected marginalized populations. Recently, far-right online communities have incorporated neo-Malthusian thinking into a philosophy called eco-fascism, which justifies fascistic policies and violence targeting marginalized populations by claiming that they are disproportionately responsible for environmental issues. Elements of this philosophy are evident in mainstream conservative rhetoric. Population growth is often assumed to be a cause of climate change, and population control a solution, despite the connection between population growth and climate change being disputed by political ecologists. Without interrogating these assumptions, histories, and ideological connections, those who include reproductive health services in narratives of climate crises and imminent existential threats – including governments, NGOs, and advocates – set the stage for reproductive justice to be attacked by political actors. These attacks may be motivated either by an unwillingness to change economic policies or by fascistic ideologies. In order to prevent climate change from being used to justify such attacks, these actors must decouple discussions of reproductive health services from discussion of solutions to climate change.

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Introduction

Climate change, perhaps the greatest public health threat of our time, is an incredibly complex problem to solve. The global community is not on track to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius and it is possible that global warming will exceed 2 degrees Celsius.¹ Projections of the impacts of 2 degrees Celsius of warming are quite drastic and will affect everyone on Earth — but not equally.² Climate change will impact the social, economic, political, and physical systems that govern life on Earth. What makes climate change such a difficult issue is that addressing it would implicate the foundation of our dominant modes of production. In order to act on the scale necessary to avoid the worst impacts of climate change, the global economy must be shifted away from fossil fuels. This is opposed by governments and elites alike whose power and wealth is derived from fossil fuels, which may push actors in positions of power to seek ‘solutions’ to climate change that do not require a shift away from fossil fuels, such as population control measures. Invocations of population growth as a cause of climate change are pervasive in some environmentalist circles. These discussions echo a long and dark history in the Western environmental movement of neo-Malthusian views of population growth that target poor and marginalized communities and reinforce unjust racist structures. As population policy centers reproduction, women and others with the capacity for pregnancy would be disproportionately burdened.³

¹ Meinshausen, Malte, Jared Lewis, Christophe McGlade, Johannes Gütschow, Zebedee Nicholls, Rebecca Burdon, Laura Cozzi, and Bernd Hackmann. “Realization of Paris Agreement Pledges May Limit Warming Just below 2 °C.” *Nature* 604, no. 7905 (April 2022): 304–9. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-04553-z>.

² Sun, Qiaohong, Chiyuan Miao, Martin Hanel, Alistair G. L. Borthwick, Qingyun Duan, Duoying Ji, and Hu Li. “Global Heat Stress on Health, Wildfires, and Agricultural Crops under Different Levels of Climate Warming.” *Environment International* 128 (July 1, 2019): 125–36. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2019.04.025>.

³ In this paper I will use the term women as a shorthand for those who have the capacity for pregnancy for simplicity’s sake, but I acknowledge that not all women have the capacity for pregnancy and not all people with the capacity for pregnancy are women.

Considering the seriousness of the impacts of climate change, the implications of addressing climate change for the global elite, the history of attitudes toward population control in the Western environmental movement, and the emergence of eco-fascism as a radicalizing ideology, I fear that it is possible that reproduction, especially in the Global South, becomes a site of Western interference in order to deflect the responsibility of addressing climate change. In this paper, I will use the lens of eco-fascism to ground my analysis of attitudes towards population growth and harmful population policies instituted in the name of environmental protection in order to illuminate the injustices that they produce. The tragedy of the population control narrative in climate and environmental discourse is that the results threatens the reproductive justice of groups that are not responsible for the problem, without actually addressing the causes of climate change.

Roadmap

In this paper, I will first briefly discuss how climate change poses an existential threat to nations and how that impacts politics and policy. Next, I will introduce the concept of eco-fascism. Then I will provide context regarding the differential impacts of climate change as well as the different culpability borne by nations for climate change and the actions that are being taken to address climate change. After that, I will consider how population growth is discussed in relation to climate change. Following this, I will briefly discuss the evolution and spread of neo-Malthusian attitudes toward population control. Subsequently, I will consider these attitudes using eco-fascism as an analytical lens. Afterwards, I will provide examples of eco-fascistic ideas in current political rhetoric. Finally, I will discuss the implications of explicitly and implicitly instrumentalizing reproduction to address climate change at a time when eco-fascism is present in certain political spheres.

Climate Change as an Existential Threat

Climate change can be viewed as an existential threat in more than one way. There is the literal way that climate change is an existential threat, as vast areas of heavily populated lands will likely no longer be inhabitable in the future if greenhouse gas emissions are not cut heavily.⁴ Climate change can also be considered an existential threat to political regimes in another way. Climate impacts such as drought and other extreme weather events can lead to climate migration and other consequences such as food and water shortages which may destabilize a regime if basic needs of its population are not met.⁵ Another way that climate change can be considered an existential threat is that regimes that depend on revenue from fossil fuel production to finance their budgets as well as to appease their populations, especially where the social contract between state and population is based on an exchange of rights and freedoms for wealth and stability, could be threatened. In these cases, climate action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels would likely be viewed in some sense as an existential threat.⁶ In all three scenarios, climate action (or what would be viewed by political leaders as climate action) that did not require a fundamental restructuring of the economy, like population policies that would result in less births, would likely be attractive.

In the last half-century, climate change has become a notable issue in international politics. While not enough to prevent the climate crisis that we are currently facing, climate change has garnered attention by the international community during this time despite significant

⁴ Kumar, Abhishek, Shilpi Nagar, and Shalini Anand. "1 - Climate Change and Existential Threats." In *Global Climate Change*, edited by Suruchi Singh, Pardeep Singh, S. Rangabhashiyam, and K. K. Srivastava, 1–31. Elsevier, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-822928-6.00005-8>.

⁵ Nardulli, Peter F., Buddy Peyton, and Joseph Bajjalieh. "Climate Change and Civil Unrest: The Impact of Rapid-Onset Disasters." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 2 (March 1, 2015): 310–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002713503809>.

⁶ Colgan, Jeff D., Jessica F. Green, and Thomas N. Hale. "Asset Revaluation and the Existential Politics of Climate Change." *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (ed 2021): 586–610. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000296>.

uncertainties in the way that it would play out. Allan argues that the rising of climate change's profile in the late 1980s was due in part to the change in frame used by climate scientists and advocates from one that focused on the technical aspects of climate change to one that framed climate change as a security threat.⁷ This was done by invoking language used to describe the ongoing Cold War and threat of nuclear winter. The report that was published following the 1988 Toronto Conference (whose full title was the Toronto Conference on the Changing Atmosphere: Implications for Global Security) stated that the consequences of climate change were "second only to a nuclear war," placing climate change firmly in the sphere of international security. Allan goes on to argue that while the securitization of climate change did increase the attention put on climate change by international organizations and nation-states, it did not result in significant action because of the nature of the threat of climate change as something that would occur in the future.⁸ Warner and Boas agree that the 'securitizing move' for climate change has not been successful. They write that in order to successfully securitize an issue, the securitizing move must be accepted by the target audience, which in the case of climate change in the international community would be global actors such as rapidly developing economies such as the BRICS bloc (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). Warner and Boas argue that securitization can lead to the instrumentalization of an issue for ulterior motives, be they political, social, economic, etc.⁹ This instrumentalization of climate change and broader environmental problems as a security issue is already playing out in various political arenas

⁷ Allan, Bentley B. "Second Only to Nuclear War: Science and the Making of Existential Threat in Global Climate Governance." *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (December 1, 2017): 809–20. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx048>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Warner, Jeroen, and Ingrid Boas. "Securitization of Climate Change: How Invoking Global Dangers for Instrumental Ends Can Backfire." *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 37, no. 8 (December 1, 2019): 1471–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654419834018>.

around the world. One arena in which this has historically played out, in response to environmental degradation before climate change became the top priority, is population policy.

According to securitization theory, when threats are considered existential in the political system, more radical or extreme actions may be taken by governments or other actors than they would under normal circumstances.¹⁰ Thus, framing something as an existential threat will change the way the threat is addressed, as it will be driven by a sense of apocalyptic urgency and will not be as constrained by political norms.¹¹ Touting population control as a potential solution to an existential threat has the potential to result in extreme policies that would otherwise not be politically feasible.

One extreme reaction to climate change and environmental degradation more broadly that has emerged is the growing presence of eco-fascism. Eco-fascism has become popular in online fringe circles, but echoes of the ideas supported by eco-fascists are present in more mainstream conservative policies as well as in media.¹² These policies and related rhetoric blame some groups, like immigrants or people of color, more than other groups for environmental issues, threatening human rights while not actually addressing the cause of the environmental issues in question. These policies and rhetoric also use environmental issues to justify fascistic or fascistic-adjacent outcomes. Some of these Eco-fascists believe that because the human population is damaging the Earth, the way to address the issue is to decrease the size of the population, through violence and eugenics if necessary. Eco-fascists also believe that some

¹⁰ Buzan, Barry. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, Colo. ; London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, c1998.

¹¹ Warner, Jeroen, and Ingrid Boas. "Securitization of Climate Change: How Invoking Global Dangers for Instrumental Ends Can Backfire." *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 37, no. 8 (December 1, 2019): 1471–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654419834018>.

¹² "Eco-Fascism: The Greenwashing of the Far Right – DW – 05/19/2022." Accessed April 27, 2023. <https://www.dw.com/en/what-is-eco-fascism-the-greenwashing-of-the-far-right-terrorism-climate-change-buffalo-shooter/a-61867605>.

populations – usually poor people, immigrants, people with disabilities, and people of color – are more at fault for environmental issues than others.¹³ Eco-fascism is connected to the concept of ‘deep ecology,’ whose proponents believe that humans do not take precedence over any other species on the planet and that in order to save the planet, the human population should be limited through means such as famine and pandemics.

Eco-Fascism

An extremist writer and self-proclaimed eco-fascist named Pentti Linkola is cited by those who commit violence in the name of eco-fascism. He wrote, “When the lifeboat is full, those who hate life will try to load it with more people and sink the lot. Those who love and respect life will take the ship's axe and sever the extra hands that cling to the sides.” He advocated for no immigration, cross-border travel, or trade. He also called for dictatorship, specifically a dictatorship that would result in the death of many, writing, “There cannot be so incompetent dictator, that he would show more stupidity than a majority of the people. Best dictatorship would be one where lots of heads would roll and government would prevent any economic growth.” In terms of controlling reproduction he wrote, “Birthgiving must be licenced [sic]. To enhance population quality, genetically or socially unfit homes will be denied offspring, so that several birth licences [sic] can be allowed to families of quality.” Linkola also explicitly advocated for “downsizing population” and “killing defectives.”¹⁴ While the term eco-fascism has been articulated more recently, its fundamental ideas are not new. In fact, some attitudes

¹³ Rockey, Francisca. “The Dangers of Eco-Fascism and Why It’s a ‘Veneer for Racist Beliefs.’” euronews, March 21, 2021. <https://www.euronews.com/green/2021/03/21/the-dangers-of-eco-fascism-and-why-it-s-a-veneer-for-racist-beliefs>.

¹⁴ “Pentti Linkola: Ecofascism and Deep Ecology.” Accessed April 2, 2023. https://www.penttilinkola.com/pentti_linkola/ecofascism/.

towards population growth and some population policies that were implemented in the 20th century align in motivation or in result with eco-fascism.

In their book about eco-fascism, Moore and Roberts offer three forms of political fascism, “an authoritarian state; a racial mass movement; and extrajudicial deadly violence.”¹⁵ They go on to explain that the fascism of the early-mid 20th century incorporated all the three forms simultaneously. Given the current dominant political and economic structures, this is no longer possible. However, while the three forms of eco-fascism are not all currently present in dominant politics, some of these elements are present in political rhetoric if not in practice. Multiple mass shootings have been perpetrated by young men who self-identify as eco-fascists.¹⁶ The rise and mainstreaming of white nationalism in the U.S. and in Europe and the overlap of white nationalist and eco-fascistic ideas makes it seem that a racial mass movement that incorporates eco-fascist ideology is not completely out of the realm of possibility in the future. This begs the question: how popular will the ideas related to eco-fascism become as the impacts of climate change become more and more apparent and extreme?

Given the history of population control in the name of the environment, it is possible that reproduction will be a site of extreme and unjust policies as the impacts of climate change become more drastic and the pressure on elites to transition away from fossil fuels becomes greater. A focus on reproduction will surely target women, reinforcing patriarchal structures, but will also likely target marginalized and racialized communities, resulting in the continuation and amplification of existing unjust structures and in an unjust demographic shift favoring politically powerful and dominant populations.

¹⁵ Moore, Sam, and Alex Roberts. *The Rise of Ecofascism: Climate Change and the Far Right*. Wiley, 2022.

¹⁶ Milman, Oliver. “Buffalo Suspect May Be Latest Mass Shooter Motivated by ‘Eco-Fascism.’” *The Guardian*, May 17, 2022, sec. US news. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/17/buffalo-shooting-suspect-eco-fascism>.

Reproductive Control for Governmental Objectives

There are numerous examples of governments interfering with or manipulating their population's reproduction to serve a governmental objective. China's one-child policy is a prime example of coercive population policy to serve a government objective. In 1979, the Chinese government announced that most families could only have one child, and those who did not comply would face punishment. At the time that this policy was introduced, officials tied worsening standards of living in China to overpopulation, aligning the policy squarely with neo-Malthusian thinking.¹⁷ Married couples had to apply for birth permits and it was illegal to be a single parent. The one-child policy resulted in a pattern of forced or coerced sterilizations, abortions, or IUD implantations.¹⁸ This population policy led to gross violations of human rights, both in terms of denying people the right to determine when and how many children to have and what to do about pregnancies once they occurred.¹⁹ More recently, this policy has been touted by Chinese officials as having been a major climate win. At COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009, the Chinese Vice Minister for National Population and Family Planning Commission claimed that the one-child policy prevented 400 million births and thus China had averted 1.8 billion tons of carbon dioxide emissions annually. This speech was made in an effort to position China as a global leader in climate action despite being the country that currently emits the most greenhouse gasses.²⁰ Just seven years later in 2016, the Chinese government amended its population policy to allow most families to have two children amid concerns about an aging population. It is

¹⁷ Zhang, Junsen. "The Evolution of China's One-Child Policy and Its Effects on Family Outcomes." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 1 (February 1, 2017): 141–60. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.1.141>.

¹⁸ Follett, Chelsea. "Neo-Malthusianism and Coercive Population Control in China and India: Overpopulation Concerns Often Result in Coercion." Cato Institute, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26887>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Sasser, Jade. *On Infertile Ground Population Control and Women's Rights in the Era of Climate Change*. Baltimore, Md: Project MUSE, 2018. pg. 89

expected that China's population may shrink within the next 10 years. There are significant concerns that as the population shrinks, China's economic growth will be derailed by a smaller workforce, which would have implications globally.²¹ This is an example of how a government is willing and able to impose an extreme and oppressive reproductive policy to change their population in order to fit their national needs. In this case, reproductive policy served development and economic needs that contributed to China's rapid ascent to geopolitical superpower status, raising the question: if the aging and shrinking population eventually threatens China's economic and therefore geopolitical dominance and perhaps even national security, what could reproductive policy look like in the future?

Climate Change: Culpability, Impacts, and International Action

Climate change is such a difficult problem to solve because it requires international cooperation and a restructuring of the global economy, so that it no longer relies on fossil fuels in order to adequately address climate change. These tasks are so difficult to achieve not only because of the scale of action that is necessary, but also because of the uneven distribution of the impacts of climate change, the differential culpability for causing climate change, and the different capacity for action among the nations of the world. Climate change raises questions of justice on national and international levels, and implicates existing injustices, both historical and contemporary.

The impacts of climate change exacerbates inequities not only between the Global North and the Global South, but also within societies. The inequities that are highlighted by the impacts of climate change are most often related to racist social and political structures. This includes resource extraction from the Global South by the Global North through colonialism and

²¹ Kuo, Lily. "Can China Recover from Its Disastrous One-Child Policy?" *The Guardian*, March 2, 2019, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/02/china-population-control-two-child-policy>.

extractivist capitalist structures.²² These structures are also implicated in the cause of climate change, greenhouse gas-emitting economic activity, and in dictating who is doing the most of such activity. That is to say that, the wealth that the Global North amassed at the expense of the Global South due to racist colonial structures led the Global North to industrialize and thus currently emit much more climate-changing greenhouse gasses.²³ These emissions have resulted in climate change that impacts the Global South disproportionately to the Global North.²⁴ These compounding injustices as well as the asymmetry of who has caused climate change and who is most negatively affected, in addition to the wealth that some nations continue to amass via greenhouse gas-emitting activities, cause major barriers to adequate action on climate change. These dynamics set the stage for more drastic impacts of climate change, and likely related injustices, in the future. In this section, I will discuss who is most at fault for the greenhouse gas emissions that have resulted in climate change. Then, I will briefly highlight some of the impacts of climate change. Finally, I will consider current international action and commitments to address climate change. This section will highlight the gravity of the implications of climate change and the inadequacy of current measures to address it, as well as the barriers to achieving climate action. I will do this in order to contextualize the claim that climate change can and is considered an existential threat and could set the stage for the implementation of harmful policies under the guise of climate action.

²² Táíwò, Olúfẹ̀mí O. *Reconsidering Reparations*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022.

²³ State of the Planet. “How Colonialism Spawned and Continues to Exacerbate the Climate Crisis,” September 21, 2022. <https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2022/09/21/how-colonialism-spawned-and-continues-to-exacerbate-the-climate-crisis/>.

²⁴ Romanello, Marina, Claudia Di Napoli, Paul Drummond, Carole Green, Harry Kennard, Pete Lampard, Daniel Scamman, et al. “The 2022 Report of the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change: Health at the Mercy of Fossil Fuels.” *The Lancet* 400, no. 10363 (November 5, 2022): 1619–54. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(22\)01540-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(22)01540-9).

Who is emitting planet-warming gasses?

Climate change is driven in most part by the burning of fossil fuels, which increased exponentially in the West beginning with the Industrial Revolution. This means that rich, Western, industrialized nations are responsible for most historical emissions. A 2021 analysis shows that just 23 rich nations, which represent 12% of the world's population, are responsible for 50% of all historical carbon dioxide emissions. The United States alone is responsible for nearly one-quarter (24.6%) of *all* historical emissions.²⁵ When considering current per capita emission, the U.S. emits 14.7 metric tons of carbon dioxide per year per capita, whereas most nations in Africa emit less than 1 metric ton per year per capita. According to the World Bank, North America on average emits 14.8 metric tons of carbon dioxide per year per capita, as compared to Latin America and the Caribbean which emit 2.6 metric tons per year per capita, and Sub-Saharan Africa, which emits 0.7 metric tons per year per capita. In aggregate, the countries designated as least economically developed by the UN emit 0.3 metric tons per year per capita.²⁶ By doing some crude math, it takes 49 people in least developed nations to match the emissions of one person in the United States.

Impacts of climate change

The threat of climate change is evident to much of the world's population. In fact, climate change is causing worry for most populations around the world. A 2021 study conducted by the Yale Program for Climate Change Communication in conjunction with Meta (formerly Facebook) found that the majority of Facebook users surveyed in 108 of 110 areas worldwide

²⁵ Popovich, Nadja, and Brad Plumer. "Who Has The Most Historical Responsibility for Climate Change?" *The New York Times*, November 12, 2021, sec. Climate.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/11/12/climate/cop26-emissions-compensation.html>.

²⁶ "CO2 Emissions (Metric Tons per Capita) | Data." Accessed March 2, 2023.

https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC?most_recent_value_desc=true.

were worried about climate change. The only survey areas in which less than half of respondents reported to be worried about climate change were Jordan (48%) and Yemen (32%).²⁷ Despite this widespread worry, governments around the world are still not taking action to address the causes and the impacts of climate change at the rate or scale necessary to avoid dramatic consequences.

Climate change is a significant public health issue. The annual *Lancet Countdown report on health and climate change* in 2021 was entitled “Code red for a healthy future.” The impacts of climate change are already resulting in worse health outcomes around the world. A 2021 study found that approximately 5 million people die each year due to non-optimal temperatures, accounting for 9.43% of all deaths globally.²⁸ This number is likely to significantly increase as the impacts of climate change become more acute. The WHO predicts that between 2030 and 2050, there will be 250,000 additional deaths per year due to climate-sensitive conditions, namely malnutrition, malaria, diarrheal diseases, and heat stress.²⁹ A theme throughout the *Lancet Countdown report on health and climate change* in 2021 and 2022 is that lower Human Development Index (HDI) countries are more impacted by the impacts of climate change. For example, as noted in the 2022 report, in 2021 450 billion potential labor hours were lost globally due to extreme heat. This translated to 0.72% of global economic output, but 5.6% of GDP in low HDI countries. These countries felt this impact more severely, and had less of an economic cushion to absorb the loss. In fact, the report states that agricultural workers in low HDI

²⁷ Yale Program on Climate Change Communication. “International Public Opinion on Climate Change, 2022.” Accessed April 20, 2023. <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/international-public-opinion-on-climate-change-2022/>.

²⁸ Zhao, Qi, Yuming Guo, Tingting Ye, Antonio Gasparrini, Shilu Tong, Ala Overcenco, Aleš Urban, et al. “Global, Regional, and National Burden of Mortality Associated with Non-Optimal Ambient Temperatures from 2000 to 2019: A Three-Stage Modelling Study.” *The Lancet Planetary Health* 5, no. 7 (July 1, 2021): e415–25. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(21\)00081-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00081-4).

²⁹ “Climate Change.” Accessed March 1, 2023. <https://www.who.int/health-topics/climate-change>.

countries faced 82% losses, significantly impacting their finances, which in turn likely impacted their food security and social determinants of health.³⁰

The impacts of climate change are not only felt in the Global South, but also in the Global North. In 2022 alone, 3 million people in the U.S. alone were displaced by extreme weather events.³¹ The impacts of climate change are not borne equally within the U.S. A systematic review considering studies about hurricanes, wildfires, extreme cold and heat, and flooding found that there were racial disparities in the health impacts from these climate change-related events. They found that Black, Latinx, Native American, Pacific Islanders, and Asian communities are at higher risk for negative health impacts than White communities. Climate change related health impacts compound existing racial disparities in health and healthcare access in the U.S.³²

The impacts of climate change vary not only by place, class, and race, but also by gender. Women and girls around the world are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change.³³ This is because the impacts of climate change exacerbate existing unjust patriarchal structures. The impacts of climate change must also be considered through an intersectional lens, as poor women of color in the Global South are often most at risk because of the many and

³⁰ Romanello, Marina, Claudia Di Napoli, Paul Drummond, Carole Green, Harry Kennard, Pete Lampard, Daniel Scamman, et al. “The 2022 Report of the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change: Health at the Mercy of Fossil Fuels.” *The Lancet* 400, no. 10363 (November 5, 2022): 1619–54. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(22\)01540-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(22)01540-9).

³¹ Bittle, Jake. “The American Climate Migration Has Already Begun.” *The Guardian*, February 23, 2023, sec. Opinion. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/23/us-climate-crisis-housing-migration-natural-disasters>.

³² Berberian, Alique G., David J. X. Gonzalez, and Lara J. Cushing. “Racial Disparities in Climate Change-Related Health Effects in the United States.” *Current Environmental Health Reports* 9, no. 3 (2022): 451–64. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40572-022-00360-w>.

³³ Thomas, Kimberley, R. Dean Hardy, Heather Lazrus, Michael Mendez, Ben Orlove, Isabel Rivera-Collazo, J. Timmons Roberts, Marcy Rockman, Benjamin P. Warner, and Robert Winthrop. “Explaining Differential Vulnerability to Climate Change: A Social Science Review.” *WIREs Climate Change* 10, no. 2 (2019): e565. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.565>.

compounding unjust forces and structures that impact their lives.³⁴ In many parts of the world, the burden to supply food, water, and fuel falls disproportionately on women. Climate change makes these tasks significantly more difficult. It not only puts women more at risk for exposure to extreme weather events, but also puts them at greater risk for violence as those become more difficult to procure.³⁵ According to UN Environment, 80% of people displaced by climate change are women and therefore at greater risk to all the health and safety issues related to displacement.³⁶ Women and other people with the capacity for pregnancy are at risk also because of the increase in the spread of vector-borne diseases like malaria that are associated with poor maternal health outcomes.³⁷ There is an additional risk for women and other people with the capacity for pregnancy as there are some who consider limiting population growth, especially in the Global South, as a necessary step to address climate change, which has the potential to spur policies that conflict with reproductive justice. As I will discuss in detail below, there is a dark history within the influential environmental movement in the U.S. of connecting environmental ills with population growth and thus advocating for coercive and restrictive reproductive policies in the name of the government. Any similar policy using climate change as justification to limit population growth would likely disproportionately impact women due to patriarchal structures, and not all women equally. This confluence of reproductive rights, reproductive justice, and the school of thought that population control is necessary to address climate change will be a focus of this paper.

³⁴ Alston, Margaret, and Kerri Whittenbury, eds. *Research, Action and Policy: Addressing the Gendered Impacts of Climate Change*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-5518-5>.

³⁵ UN Women – Headquarters. “Explainer: How Gender Inequality and Climate Change Are Interconnected,” February 28, 2022. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/explainer/2022/02/explainer-how-gender-inequality-and-climate-change-are-interconnected>.

³⁶ OHCHR. “Climate Change Exacerbates Violence against Women and Girls.” Accessed April 20, 2023. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2022/07/climate-change-exacerbates-violence-against-women-and-girls>.

³⁷ UN Women – Headquarters. “Explainer: How Gender Inequality and Climate Change Are Interconnected,” February 28, 2022.

Action to Address Climate Change

In the last decade, there has been progress made on the international level to address climate change. In December 2015, 196 parties signed the Paris Agreement at the UN Climate Change Conference. This is a legally-binding international agreement that sets a goal of keeping global warming to “well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels” and sets an aspirational goal “to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.” Action taken by parties to meet the goals of the agreement are set by the parties themselves. These commitments are known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).³⁸

In 2022, global average temperatures were already 1.2°C above pre-industrial levels.³⁹ Because some degree of warming is baked-in due to the gasses that have already been emitted, in order to meet the 1.5°C goal, global emissions would have to peak before 2025, and decrease by around 40% by 2030, according to UN Climate Change.⁴⁰ A recent study found that global carbon dioxide emissions increased by 1.5% in 2022 as compared to 2021 and by 7.9% as compared to 2020. The researchers estimate that in 2022, we used up 13-36% of the remaining carbon budget to limit warming to 1.5°C. They go on to say that it is likely that the entire carbon budget to limit warming to 1.5°C will be used within 2-7 years.⁴¹ In 2021 ahead of COP26, 5 years after the implementation of the agreement, NDCs only accounted for 73.85% of emissions. Projected global emissions for 2030 are around 59 gigatons of carbon dioxide equivalent. An analysis by the World Resources Institute found that all NDCs together decrease that number by 6.1 gigatons of carbon dioxide equivalent, far from the necessary reductions to keep warming to

³⁸ “The Paris Agreement | UNFCCC.” Accessed April 21, 2023. <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>.

³⁹ “The CAT Thermometer.” Accessed April 21, 2023. <https://climateactiontracker.org/global/cat-thermometer/>.

⁴⁰ “The Paris Agreement | UNFCCC.”

⁴¹ Liu, Zhu, Zhu Deng, Steve Davis, and Philippe Ciais. “Monitoring Global Carbon Emissions in 2022.” *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment* 4, no. 4 (April 2023): 205–6. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-023-00406-z>.

1.5°C.⁴² According to the UN Climate Change’s COP26 NDC synthesis report, current NDCs will result in an 13.7% *increase* in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030.⁴³

While the total reductions committed through NDCs are disappointing, 76 countries, including the U.S. and China, have made more significant long-term commitments, such as achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. One study found that if all NDCs and long term commitments are fulfilled on time, then warming can be limited to just below 2°C.⁴⁴ This is an encouraging finding, however, very few countries are on track to achieve their commitments. Climate Action Tracker, a group of independent climate analysts, have designated action by the U.S. and China, two of the greatest emitters, to be “insufficient” and “highly insufficient” respectively, which in their definition means that their action is not compatible with a world that warms less than 3°C.^{45,46}

While the difference between 1.5°C and 2°C may not seem like much, the difference in impacts the warming will cause is quite significant. According to the IPCC, the proportion of the world’s population that would be exposed to severe heat would be 2.6 times higher (13% vs 37%) in a 2°C scenario than in a 1.5°C scenario. In a 1.5°C scenario, there would likely be an ice-free summer in the Arctic every 10 years, as compared to every 100 years in a 2°C scenario. The amount of permafrost that would melt in a 2°C scenario would be 38% greater than in a 1.5°C scenario. There would be double the vertebrate species and plant species loss and triple the

⁴² Fransen, Taryn. “Making Sense of Countries’ Paris Agreement Climate Pledges,” October 22, 2021. <https://www.wri.org/insights/understanding-ndcs-paris-agreement-climate-pledges>.

⁴³ “COP26: Update to the NDC Synthesis Report | UNFCCC.” Accessed April 21, 2023. <https://unfccc.int/news/cop26-update-to-the-ndc-synthesis-report>.

⁴⁴ Meinshausen, Malte, Jared Lewis, Christophe McGlade, Johannes Gütschow, Zebedee Nicholls, Rebecca Burdon, Laura Cozzi, and Bernd Hackmann. “Realization of Paris Agreement Pledges May Limit Warming Just below 2 °C.” *Nature* 604, no. 7905 (April 2022): 304–9. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-04553-z>.

⁴⁵ Climate Action Tracker. “USA.” Accessed April 21, 2023. <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/usa/>.

⁴⁶ Climate Action Tracker. “China.” Accessed April 21, 2023. <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/china/>.

insect species loss in a 2°C scenario relative to a 1.5°C scenario. Maize yields in the tropics would decrease by 7% versus 3% and catches from marine fisheries would decrease by 3 million tons annually versus 1.5 million tons annually in a 2°C scenario relative to a 1.5°C scenario.⁴⁷

Every tenth of a degree counts.

Barriers to Climate Action

The barriers to climate action internationally and nationally are many and differ from country to country. One barrier to climate action is financing. It is estimated that in order to achieve net-zero emissions globally by 2050, there needs to be \$9.2 trillion spent annually until 2050, which is about one-third more than is currently being spent.⁴⁸ Another barrier, especially in places like the U.S., is political will and buy-in. Because climate change and climate action has been politicized in the highly polarized American political system, opponents of climate action erect political barriers, like the blocking of the Build Back Better plan, or inconsistent policies as power changes hands, such as when the Trump administration backed out of the Paris Agreement.⁴⁹ As climate action will deemphasize or eliminate some industries, like fossil fuel extraction and meat and dairy production, and emphasize other industries, like infrastructure development and renewable energy, there is strong resistance by some industry and labor groups, which contributes to the political barriers to climate action in the U.S.⁵⁰ In other places like

⁴⁷ Levin, Kelly. “Half a Degree and a World Apart: The Difference in Climate Impacts Between 1.5°C and 2°C of Warming,” October 7, 2018. <https://www.wri.org/insights/half-degree-and-world-apart-difference-climate-impacts-between-15c-and-2c-warming>.

⁴⁸ “The Net-Zero Transition: Its Cost and Benefits | Sustainability | McKinsey & Company.” Accessed April 21, 2023. <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/sustainability/our-insights/the-net-zero-transition-what-it-would-cost-what-it-could-bring>.

⁴⁹ Gross, Samantha. “Barriers to Achieving US Climate Goals Are More Political than Technical.” *Brookings* (blog), May 10, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/planetpolicy/2021/05/10/barriers-to-achieving-us-climate-goals-are-more-political-than-technical/>.

⁵⁰ Basseches, Joshua A., Rebecca Bromley-Trujillo, Maxwell T. Boykoff, Trevor Culhane, Galen Hall, Noel Healy, David J. Hess, et al. “Climate Policy Conflict in the U.S. States: A Critical Review and Way Forward.” *Climatic Change* 170, no. 3 (February 16, 2022): 32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-022-03319-w>.

India, the lack of institutional capacity, information, and knowledge about climate change are barriers to climate action.⁵¹ The barriers to climate action need to be navigated by governments in order to limit global warming to as low a level as is still possible. However, these barriers and the difficulty of achieving climate action also raise the possibility of the implementation of harmful, oppressive, and ineffective policies in order to address climate change.

Climate Change, Population, and Reproduction

Discussion on climate change and environmental issues more broadly often includes talk of overpopulation, pointing to high birth rates as a source of environmental and social ills. For example, overpopulation is often simultaneously connected to climate change and looming food shortages, which commentators theorize will lead to increases in crime and social unrest and even the rise of totalitarian rule.⁵² The focus of some environmentalists on human reproduction and population growth is not a new phenomenon, and it remains challenged by political ecologists.⁵³ The assumption that population growth is intrinsically tied to environmental and social problems can be traced back to the 18th-century English thinker Thomas Malthus, was popularized in the West by neo-Malthusians such as Paul Ehrlich and Garrett Hardin in the 1960s, and spread to the Global South through neocolonial channels such as programs of the World Bank and the Rockefeller Foundation. This contributed to the implementation of coercive

⁵¹ G, Dhanapal, Divya Gupta, and Anjal Prakash. “Barriers and Opportunities in Achieving Climate and Sustainable Development Goals in India: A Multilevel Analysis.” *Journal of Integrative Environmental Sciences* 20, no. 1 (December 31, 2023): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1943815X.2022.2163665>.

⁵² Everything Connects. “Overpopulation Effects.” Accessed April 30, 2023. <https://www.everythingconnects.org/overpopulation-effects.html>.

⁵³ Hendrixson, Anne, and Betsy Hartmann. “Threats and Burdens: Challenging Scarcity-Driven Narratives of ‘Overpopulation.’” *Geoforum* 101 (May 1, 2019): 250–59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.08.009>.

population control measures in various countries including the U.S., China, and India that often targeted racialized and marginalized populations.^{54, 55}

As objections to coercive measures to interfere in reproduction became more common as reproductive rights were articulated and advocated for, especially following the Cairo Convention in 1994 where countries condemned coercive population policies,⁵⁶ organizations that had previously advocated for neo-Malthusian measures changed their positions to fit the rights-based populationist model. However, the linear evolution from Malthusianism, to neo-Malthusianism, to populationism (the school of thought that believes that population growth is inevitable and harmful and the way to address it is through women's empowerment) is not universal. Some thinkers and actors have used the ideas of Malthus to underpin actions and ideas that target racialized and marginalized groups, blaming them for environmental problems. One such ideology is eco-fascism. While more recently articulated, eco-fascism is an apt lens through which to understand the neo-Malthusians and their programs of the past, the current presence of harmful political rhetoric in the West connecting environmental issues and marginalized populations, and the potential for harm done to marginalized populations in the name of the environment as the impacts of climate change become more drastic.

Population Growth and Climate Change

In discussions of climate change, population growth is often implicitly and sometimes explicitly pointed to as a driver of the problem. In fact, the IPCC report in 2014 said “Globally, economic and population growth continued to be the most important drivers of increases in CO₂

⁵⁴ Theobald, Brianna. *Reproduction on the Reservation: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Colonialism in the Long Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/12/monograph/book/67726>.

⁵⁵ Follett, Chelsea. “Neo-Malthusianism and Coercive Population Control in China and India: Overpopulation Concerns Often Result in Coercion.” Cato Institute, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26887>.

⁵⁶ “Programme of Action.” International Conference on Population and Development. Cairo: United Nations, 1994.

emissions from fossil fuel combustion. The contribution of population growth between 2000 and 2010 remained roughly identical to the previous three decades, while the contribution of economic growth has risen sharply.”⁵⁷ The population is undeniably growing; however, in the literature it is not clear that population growth is tied directly to climate change.

The world’s population reached 8 billion in 2022, and the UN projects that there will be 9.7 billion people by 2050 before reaching a peak population of around 10.4 billion in the 2080s. However, the population growth rate is the slowest it has been since the 1950s. The UN estimates that two thirds of the population live in countries where the fertility rate is at 2.1 (the replacement rate) or lower. Much of the population growth until 2050 is assumed due to the large proportion of the world’s population that is young and will be in their reproductive years between now and 2050.⁵⁸ Places where fertility rates remain above replacement levels tend to be places that have very low emissions per capita. The reference to population growth has been removed from subsequent IPCC reports, perhaps signaling a recognition of the disconnect between emissions and where population growth is occurring. However, the discussion of population growth in connection to climate change, and particularly in connection to climate solutions remains present in environmentalist circles.

Yale Environment 360 published an article in July 2022 entitled “How Preventing Unwanted Pregnancies Can Help on Climate.” The authors Proctor and Schiebinger wrote “Voluntary family planning is too often ignored as a means to lower carbon emissions. But by making reproductive technologies more freely available, we can reduce global population — and

⁵⁷ IPCC, 2014: Summary for Policymakers. In: Climate Change 2014: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA.

⁵⁸ “World Population to Reach 8 Billion This Year, as Growth Rate Slows | UN News,” July 11, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/07/1122272>.

human-caused emissions — in a manner that is consistent with personal liberties.”⁵⁹ The authors of this article take care to point out the disparity in emissions of people in the Global North as compared to the Global South and to mention the history of human rights violations perpetrated in the name of population control and individuals’ rights to control their own reproduction. They also speak of limiting unwanted birth for all and do not single out certain regions, but notably the image that accompanies the article is of women in Manila, Philippines surrounded by small children, learning about birth-spacing methods. This image evokes the idea of women in the Global South reproducing ‘excessively,’ as deemed by Western actors, academics in this case. Importantly, their argument boils down to manipulating reproduction as a means to address climate change.

An organization called Population Matters advocates that stemming population growth is key to addressing climate change and other issues.⁶⁰ Until 2018, Population Matters ran a program called PopOffsets, which offered people the opportunity to offset their own carbon emissions by paying for contraception for people in lower income countries that had high fertility rates. They stated that contraception was the most cost-efficient way to decrease greenhouse gas emissions.⁶¹ This program was restructured to eliminate the offsets component, and now supports grassroots organizations that are working to expand access to contraception in Global South countries. The program is now called “Empower to Plan.”⁶² Population Matters’ PopOffsets program inspired a copy-cat run by the Quaker charity Quaker Earthcare Witness.

⁵⁹ Proctor, Robert N., and Londa Schiebinger. “How Preventing Unwanted Pregnancies Can Help on Climate.” Yale E360. Accessed April 12, 2023. <https://e360.yale.edu/features/unwanted-pregnancy-contraception-abortion-climate-change>.

⁶⁰ Population Matters. “Solutions.” Accessed February 28, 2023. <https://populationmatters.org/solutions/>.

⁶¹ Vidal, John, and environment editor. “Rich Nations to Offset Emissions with Birth Control.” *The Guardian*, December 3, 2009, sec. Environment. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/dec/03/carbon-offset-projects-climate-change>.

⁶² Population Matters. “Empower To Plan.” Accessed March 2, 2023. <https://populationmatters.org/empower-to-plan/>.

Their PopOffsets program is still active and accepting contributions; they recommend people in the U.S. contribute \$3 per ton of carbon emitted to go to family planning in the Global South to offset the harm of their emissions.⁶³

Another organization that connects population growth to climate change is Population Connections. Population Connections is an organization that used to be called Zero Population Growth that was started by Paul Ehrlich and boasts 40,000 members on their website. There is a section on their website adamantly disavowing the history of coercive population control, and denying that the modern population movement is in any way racist, colonialist or eugenicist. They implicate population growth in climate change and other social ills, and in turn say that, “By highlighting the tremendous social and environmental benefits of enabling women to choose their family size, we can leverage much-needed funding for these neglected crises.”⁶⁴ Thus they explicitly view instrumentalizing reproduction as a sound and needed strategy to address climate change.

The models advocated by these organizations and the authors of the Yale Environment 360 follow the populationist school of thought which has evolved from neo-Malthusianism. It is important to put these models in historical context, both in terms of the thinking around population growth and the history of governments using population policies to serve government interests. In the next section, I will trace the evolution and influence of Malthusian thought in the U.S. environmental movement.

⁶³ QEW - Quaker Earthcare Witness. “Quaker PopOffsets - QEW,” December 3, 2020. <https://quakerearthcare.org/quaker-popoffsets/>.

⁶⁴ Population Connection. “Myths and Misconceptions About Population Trends and Dynamics.” Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://populationconnection.org/reference/myths-misconceptions/>.

Malthusian schools of thought in the U.S.

The connection between the Western environmental movement and population control begins with the writings of Thomas Malthus, an 18th-century English political economist.⁶⁵ In 1798, Malthus published “An Essay on the Principle of Population,” in which he lays out the theory that became known as Malthusianism. His basic premise was that the human population grows exponentially, while food production grows linearly, and thus the human population will outpace the ability of the Earth to sustain it, dooming humanity to live in poverty and eventually meet its untimely end. Malthus proposed two types of checks on population growths. The first was ‘preventative checks’ which included behavior changes such as abstinence. Malthus called the other category of checks ‘positive checks,’ which includes things like epidemics, famine, and war. Notably, Malthus argued that laws supporting, and thus improving the living conditions, of the poor were interfering with the positive check on population. He argued that if poor people knew they had some level of support from the state or charities (he wrote of churches) then they would likely marry and have children, thus exacerbating the population growth issue, while causing the cost of food to go up because of inadequate supply, which would in turn create worse conditions for everyone. Malthus argued that assistance to the poor should be stopped to maintain the check on population growth by making the conditions for the poor sufficiently bad so that they would not have children.⁶⁶

Malthus’s theory already became influential during his lifetime. In his seminal essay, Malthus took aim at the Poor Laws that provided support to the impoverished in England. This resulted in a substantial change to the provision of these laws when they were revised in 1834.

⁶⁵ “Thomas Malthus | Biography, Theory, Overpopulation, Poverty, & Facts | Britannica,” February 12, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Malthus>.

⁶⁶ Malthus, Thomas. “An Essay on the Principle of Population,” 1798.

Specifically, the support given to the poor was drastically reduced because of the Malthusian belief that this support exacerbated poverty by encouraging the poor to have children. Similarly, the British government had a muted response to the Irish potato famine in the 1840s because of the view that the famine was a check on population growth.⁶⁷

In the wake of Malthus' theory emerged a slightly different theory known as neo-Malthusianism. In addition to being a political economist, Malthus was a clergyman. Because of his religious beliefs, he believed that using contraception was sinful, and thus not an appropriate response to population growth. However, neo-Malthusians were not limited by such beliefs and embraced means of fertility control including contraception, but also sterilization and abortion. Neo-malthusianism first became popular in the mid-19th century, and then had a resurgence in popularity in the 1960s. Neo-Malthusian thought spread to the U.S. through the collaboration between the eugenics movement of the early 20th century, birth control activists, and neo-Malthusianists through a number of International Neo-Malthusian Conferences and eugenics and birth control-focused publications.⁶⁸ One key link in the spread of neo-Malthusianism was Margaret Sanger, pioneering birth control advocate and eugenicist.⁶⁹

Neo-Malthusianist thought spread to the early American environmental and conservationist movement through the American eugenics movement.⁷⁰ The links between the eugenics movement and the conservation movement included multiple prominent figures. For example, Gifford Pinchot, who was chief of the National Forest Service, appointed to be the chairman of the National Conservation Commission by Theodore Roosevelt, and founder of the

⁶⁷ Shermer, Michael. "Why Malthus Is Still Wrong." *Scientific American*. Accessed February 22, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican0516-72>.

⁶⁸ Klausen, Susanne, and Alison Bashford. "Fertility Control: Eugenics, Neo-Malthusianism, and Feminism."

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Orion Magazine. "Orion Magazine - Conservation and Eugenics." Accessed February 22, 2023. <https://orionmagazine.org/article/conservation-and-eugenics/>.

Yale School of Forestry (now Yale School of Environment), was also a delegate at both the first and second International Eugenics Conferences and was an advisor to the American Eugenics Society for a decade.⁷¹ Madison Grant, renowned zoologist and founder of the Bronx Zoo, was a prominent white supremacist who wrote “The Passing of the Great Race, or The Racial Basis of European History.” He was also a director of the American Eugenics Society. Grant is considered to be one of the founding fathers of eco-fascism as he blended his white supremacist, neo-Malthusian, and conservationist ideas. As such, he was an early proponent of the idea that unregulated reproduction was going to result in environmental catastrophe.⁷²

Neo-Malthusian thought continued to be present in the American environmentalist movement during its resurgence in the 1960s through figures like David Brower, the executive director of the Sierra Club, perhaps the most prominent environmentalist organization in the United States at the time. Brower commissioned Paul Ehrlich’s book *The Population Bomb*, which he wrote with his wife Anne. This book was published by the Sierra Club in 1968, and Brower wrote the foreword. It is important to note that Brower eventually left the Sierra Club and founded other influential environmental organizations such as the League for Conservation Voters and Friends of the Earth, and thus had an outsized influence on the environmental movement in the U.S.⁷³ Throughout his career, he advocated that overpopulation was one of, if not the, biggest threat faced by humanity, which informed his staunch anti-immigration stance.

⁷¹ Purdy, Jedediah. “Environmentalism’s Racist History.” *The New Yorker*, August 13, 2015. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/environmentalisms-racist-history>.

⁷² Tucker, Jeffrey. “The Founding Father of Eco-Fascism | AIER.” Accessed April 22, 2023. <https://www.aier.org/article/the-founding-father-of-eco-fascism/>.

⁷³ David Brower Center. “Who Was David Brower.” Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://browercenter.org/about/who-was-david-brower/>.

He remained on the board of the Sierra Club until he resigned shortly before his death in 2000 due to the Sierra Club's rejection of anti-immigration positions.⁷⁴

Paul Ehrlich is perhaps the most well-known and influential neo-Malthusian that is associated with the environmental movement. *The Population Bomb* became a sensation, not just among environmentalists, but in the popular media, with Ehrlich appearing repeatedly on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson.⁷⁵ The book had a similar premise to Malthus' original essay: exponential population growth outpaces the ability of the Earth to sustain it, particularly in terms of food production. Ehrlich also wrote of carbon emissions and associated temperature changes (i.e. climate change) and pollution, connecting uncontrolled population growth with this type of environmental degradation. However, unlike Malthus, Ehrlich declared that humanity was already on the brink of catastrophe due to population growth. In fact, the first lines of the book are, "The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now."⁷⁶ The book lays out an apocalyptic future that predicts ecological and social collapse due to unchecked population growth.

Ehrlich's solution is population control, specifically that the world must reach zero population growth and then have negative population growth. He proposes a variety of regulatory measures, ranging from innocuous to grave human rights violations. Ehrlich suggests a hypothetical in which a temporary sterilant was released into the water supply and limited doses of antidote were controlled by the government. He dismisses this scenario because of

⁷⁴ Kolankiewicz, Leon. "Homage to Iconic Conservationist David Brower Omits Population." CAPS, March 25, 2014. <https://capsweb.org/blog/homage-iconic-conservationist-david-brower-omits-population/>.

⁷⁵ Magazine, Smithsonian, and Charles C. Mann. "The Book That Incited a Worldwide Fear of Overpopulation." Smithsonian Magazine. Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/book-incited-worldwide-fear-overpopulation-180967499/>.

⁷⁶ Ehrlich, Paul R. *The Population Bomb*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1968.

technical limitations (a sterilant of this sort did not exist) and because of political barriers.

Ehrlich does not raise any ethical concerns with this type of intervention. He goes on to suggest more ‘moderate’ regulatory interventions, such as mandatory sterilizations for men who already have three children, economic inducements for people to get sterilized, taxes on children, taxes on child and baby related materials and equipment (e.g. diapers and cribs), and rewards for those who remain childless.⁷⁷

The book has a distinct racist undertone. The first chapter opens with an anecdote from Ehrlich in which he describes that he had an epiphany about population control while driving through a slum in Delhi where he watched people beg and defecate in the street. Again, he does not consider the underlying structures or relevant histories to understand the circumstances that he witnessed. Ehrlich returns to the Indian example often, arguing in favor of coerced sterilizations for Indian men. He writes about the U.S. providing aid to a sterilization campaign for Indian men with three or more children: “Coercion? Perhaps, but coercion in a good cause. I am sometimes astounded at the attitudes of Americans who are horrified at the prospect of our government insisting on population control as the price of food aid.”⁷⁸ This statement exemplifies not only Ehrlich’s willingness to impose his own vision of what needed to be done to address population growth, but to do so in a way that gives those targeted no options.

Another notable neo-Malthusian associated with the environmental movement in the mid 20th century was Garrett Hardin. Hardin is the author of the highly influential essay “The Tragedy of the Commons” that continues to be taught in introductory political science and environmental studies courses. The essay was published in 1968, the same year as *The Population Bomb*. This essay asserts that it is rational for individuals to exploit common

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* pgs. 152-153

resources, which will inevitably lead to the degradation of that resource. Hardin explains this concept using the example of ranchers and common grazing land. While the essay is most famous for the discussion of this tension between individual and collective benefits, Hardin wrote the essay in response to what he calls “the population problem.” Hardin continues the essay by asserting that overpopulation is an example of the tragedy of the commons because natural resources are finite. In a section entitled “Freedom to Breed is Intolerable,” Hardin argues that it was a mistake for the UN Human Rights Declaration to include the right to choose the size of one’s own family. He writes, “To couple the concept of freedom to breed with the belief that everyone born has an equal right to the commons is to lock the world in a tragic course of action.” He goes on to write “If we love the truth we must openly deny the validity of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” Hardin advocates for the regulation of births as well for the welfare state to be reexamined.⁷⁹

In addition to being a neo-Malthusian, Hardin was a known racist and eugenicist whose ideas amounted to eco-fascism. He was listed as a white nationalist by the Southern Poverty Law Center. He was an advocate of what he called “lifeboat ethics.” In a shocking essay entitled “Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor,” published in 1974, Hardin makes the analogy that rich countries are lifeboats and people from poor countries are swimming in the sea around them. He argues that not only should rich countries not let people from poor countries into the lifeboat (via immigration), but that rich countries should not even provide aid to the poor countries, thus stopping their populations from growing. He writes,

If poor countries received no food from the outside, the rate of their population growth would be periodically checked by crop failures and famines. But if they can always draw on a world food bank in time of need, their population can continue to grow unchecked, and so will their "need" for aid. In the short run, a world food bank may diminish that need, but in the long run it actually increases

⁷⁹ Hardin, Garrett. “The Tragedy of the Commons.” *Science, New Series* 162, no. 3859 (1968): 1243–48.

the need without limit. Without some system of worldwide food sharing, the proportion of people in the rich and poor nations might eventually stabilize. The overpopulated poor countries would decrease in numbers, while the rich countries that had room for more people would increase. But with a well-meaning system of sharing, such as a world food bank, the growth differential between the rich and the poor countries will not only persist, it will increase.⁸⁰

‘Lifeboat ethics’ has been adopted by contemporary eco-fascists, including Pentti Linkola.⁸¹

Hardin’s and Ehrlich’s writings were challenged by their contemporary political ecologists. This body of work in political ecology challenged the assumption that more people necessarily means worse human-caused impacts on the environment. Their scholarship was mostly based in the Marxist tradition and argued that neo-Malthusianism erased class differences in access to resources. As neo-Malthusians were advancing the idea that natural resources were being dangerously depleted, political ecologists wrote that natural resources were not fixed but rather socially constructed to benefit capitalist production.⁸²

There is another school of thought adjacent to neo-Malthusianism called populationism. Populationists, like neo-Malthusians, ascribe blame for social and ecological issues to population growth. However, unlike neo-Malthusians, they reject coercive measures to control population growth, but rather advocate for voluntary family planning, and education and employment opportunities for women, which they see as a vehicle to reducing population growth as well.⁸³ The Sierra Club’s Global Population and the Environment Program is an example of a populationist approach to population policy. Beginning in the 1970s, Sierra Club’s Global

⁸⁰ Hardin, Garrett. “Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor.” *Psychology Today*, September 1974.

⁸¹ “Pentti Linkola: Ecofascism and Deep Ecology.” Accessed April 2, 2023.

https://www.penttilinkola.com/pentti_linkola/ecofascism/.

⁸² Ojeda, Diana, Jade S. Sasser, and Elizabeth Lunstrum. “Malthus’s Specter and the Anthropocene.” *Gender, Place & Culture* 27, no. 3 (March 3, 2020): 316–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1553858>.

⁸³ Sasser, Jade. *On Infertile Ground Population Control and Women’s Rights in the Era of Climate Change*. Baltimore, Md: Project MUSE, 2018. pg. 3

Population and the Environment Program advocated for voluntary family planning in the Global South as a way to reduce population growth and its impact on the environment.⁸⁴

Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Justice

Contemporaneously to the resurgence of neo-Malthusianism, the reproductive rights movement was active in the U.S. and elsewhere, articulating rights that conflicted with neo-Malthusianism. The central right in the reproductive rights struggle was the right to control one's own reproduction, which is not compatible with the neo-Malthusian belief that reproduction could and should be manipulated in order to decrease population growth. The mainstream reproductive rights movement in the U.S. was led by white women and was mostly focused on achieving legal rights to limit one's own reproduction, through access to contraception and abortion. In 1994 the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) was held in Cairo. At this conference, actors agreed to shift away from population policies whose sole focus was to limit population growth and instead shift towards rights-based policies that focused on access to holistic reproductive health services and on improving the general well-being and autonomy of women around the world. The document that was produced at this conference, known as the Cairo Consensus, codified women's right to "freely and responsibly decide the number, spacing, and timing of their children."⁸⁵ However, in the U.S., black feminist activists felt that their needs were not fully addressed by the white-led reproductive rights movement in the U.S. and the Cairo Consensus. Following the Cairo Convention, they coined the term 'reproductive justice' in collaboration with activists from the Global South, especially in light of fears that governments would not respect all aspects of the consensus. Central to reproductive

⁸⁴ "The Sierra Club and Population Issues." Accessed February 28, 2023. <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra-club-and-population-issues>.

⁸⁵ "Programme of Action." International Conference on Population and Development. Cairo: United Nations, 1994.

justice is the right to have children and parent them in a safe environment in which they have access to all that they need to thrive if that is what one wishes.⁸⁶

Understanding neo-Malthusian attitudes through an eco-fascist lens

Policies grounded in neo-Malthusian thinking would impact people unequally elsewhere as well. In effect, neo-Malthusian population policy would result in the reinforcing of existing racist structures. For example, in *The Population Bomb*, Ehrlich pays no mind to the underlying inequitable structures that would surely result in disparate impacts of such regulations. These regulations would not be implemented in a vacuum, but rather in the existing context of a society. Taking the U.S. as an example, racial discrimination in employment, housing, and education has created significant income and wealth gaps between racial and ethnic groups, meaning that it is likely any economic regulation aimed to limit births would fall disproportionately on communities of color, in particular Black folks.⁸⁷ Another example from the U.S. context is the unequal distribution of access to political power among racial and ethnic, class, and gender lines which means that any decisions left to the government (like who could and could not have children) would be largely left in the hands of privileged white men.⁸⁸ The implementation of such programs would likely diminish population growth more in communities of color than in white communities, fundamentally reshaping the demographics of our society to further advantage much of the white population, thus resulting in a eugenic effect. It is important to note that racial and ethnic groups are not monoliths and that the implications of such policies

⁸⁶ Sister Song. “Reproductive Justice.” Accessed February 28, 2023. <https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice>.

⁸⁷ Derenoncourt, Ellora, Chi Hyun Kim, Moritz Kuhn, and Moritz Schularick. “Wealth of Two Nations: The U.S. Racial Wealth Gap, 1860-2020.” Working Paper. Working Paper Series. National Bureau of Economic Research, June 2022. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w30101>.

⁸⁸ Carter, Prudence L., and Sean F. Reardon. “Inequality Matters.” Stanford University: William T. Grant Foundation, 2014.

would likely differ based on class and gender as well as race and ethnicity. Ehrlich also does not consider the history of genocide and atrocities perpetrated against certain populations, such as Native Americans, that may be exacerbated by these policies. He also does not consider the consequences beyond simply decreasing the overall growth of the population. So while Ehrlich did not identify as an eco-fascist and did not explicitly call for limiting some populations over others, his suggested interventions would in practice result in an outcome that would be favored by eco-fascists.

Ehrlich casually proposes, and justifies, the use of coercion to achieve slower population growth. Ehrlich believes that population growth is posing an existential crisis to the world, and therefore we must do whatever we can to avoid or mitigate the worst consequences. This argument effectively gives carte blanche to do anything to slow population growth to address climate change and environmental degradation. There is no nuanced discussion of the complexities of the decision to reproduce, or of the natural rights that are implicated in reproduction, or the real potential for gross violations of these rights, or even for violence, given these arguments. He also explores no alternatives to solve the issues that he outlines, such as inadequate food supply and environmental degradation beyond radical population control. Again, he completely ignores underlying structures that produce these issues, such as capitalism, unjust capital flows between the Global North and South, patriarchy, and other inequities.

Hardin similarly does not address the racist implications of his proposed policies. In “Lifeboat Ethics,” Hardin proposed a world order that would most probably result in the death of millions in the Global South, arguing that it was the ethical way forward. Like the Ehrlichs, Hardin does not consider the underlying structures or historical injustices and resulting capital flows away from these nations to benefit wealthy nations that created the circumstances about

which he was writing. Also, like the Ehrlichs, Hardin's plan would result in a radical shift in demographics, but on the world scale, that would favor the white wealthy population at the expense of people of color in the Global South. Hardin pointedly ignores any consideration of justice to further his racist world vision, using fear-mongering about environmental degradation, resource shortages, and neo-Malthusian logic as justification.

In another essay, Hardin again clearly indicated that he did not believe that people had the right to make choices about their own reproduction. This essay, entitled "There is No Global Population Problem" was published in 1989. Hardin's principle argument was that what he called the 'population problem' should be addressed not as a global problem, but rather a local one. He points to China as a positive example of population control. He wrote, "There is no talk in China of a woman's 'right' to reproduce or of married couples' 'right to privacy.'" He argued in favor of addressing a growing population with mutual coercion, applauding the shame that he said drove Chinese women to conform to population control measures. However, he also argues that in the United States, 'successful' population control would not be achieved without legal sanctions for those who violate policies.⁸⁹ In Hardin's view, the best way to address a growing population is to strip people of the right to control their own reproduction and then punish those who do not follow the reproductive policies of the government. He justified this radical position saying that population growth would lead to catastrophe, and he did not consider the stripping of human rights and transferring reproductive decision-making to the state as a catastrophe in itself. Hardin also blames some groups of people over others for environmental issues and uses that position to justify extreme and racist measures that would impact poor Global South nations more than rich Global North nations, aligning with the eco-fascistic ideology.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Hardin, Garrett. "There Is No Global Population Problem." *The Humanist*, August 1989.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Although the harm of populationism is less acute than neo-Malthusianism because of its rejection of coercive measures, the potential for harm is still quite great. Populationists center population growth in the environmental harms that they are trying to address, which then necessitates that reproduction is central to their solutions. Thus, those who have the capacity for pregnancy and those gendered women are targeted to solve the issue. Of course, this does not apply equally across all women and people who have the capacity for pregnancy, but rather on those who are racialized, often poor, and live in the Global South. Population growth is a complex social process, and its impacts are also complex social, economic, and environmental processes. Assuming that increasing access to voluntary family planning, or even that universal access to family planning will solve these complex issues is a gross oversimplification that also overlooks the drivers of the social, environmental, economic ills that populationists are seeking to address, meaning that this ‘solution’ would never be effective. As Sasser points out, family planning essentially is an individual, consumer choice model to address a systems-level phenomenon, which fits nicely with neoliberal development strategies. The underlying assumption of populationists is that if all women had access to modern family planning services accepted by Global North governments and NGOs (for example IUDs or oral contraceptives), that all women would choose to have few children because that is what would be best for the environment. This assumption does not consider cultural and community contexts, nor limitations such as lack of capacity for follow-up care or culturally competent and linguistically accessible education and services.

Expanded access to family planning services can be a good thing – when implemented at the behest of and in collaboration with communities, with cultural competency and humility, and with respect for the needs and wants of those who receive care – as all should have the

opportunity to control their own reproduction and family planning is one way to do that. However, viewing family planning as a vehicle to solve complex societal and environmental issues is dangerous. Firstly, because of the complexity of the issues the world is facing, it is more than likely that increased family planning without shifts in underlying unfair power structures will not be an effective solution. But more importantly, it opens the door for women and others with the capacity for pregnancy to be manipulated or have their rights violated in the name of the environment. If women are seen as the solution to a host of environmental issues, they can also be seen as obstacles if they do not do what some think they should, which could lead some to rationalize rights violations and other types of violence. As seen in the works of Hardin and the Ehrlichs, when one thinks that population control is the only way to avoid an apocalypse, it is easy to justify horrific actions.

Impacts of Neo-Malthusian Thinking

Neo-Malthusian thinking is evident in population policies implemented in various places around the world in the latter half of the 20th century. One such place is India, which engaged in a mass sterilization campaign between 1975 and 1977. This policy was implemented by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi during a time known as “the Emergency.” Gandhi declared “the Emergency” after the courts barred her from office following a suit that alleged election law violations.⁹¹ During “the Emergency,” many civil and political rights were suspended by Gandhi.⁹² Through the mass sterilization campaign, 6.2 million men were sterilized. These men were often coerced or forced into getting sterilized and usually did not receive follow-up care.

⁹¹ “Indira Gandhi | Biography & Facts | Britannica,” March 28, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Indira-Gandhi>.

⁹² Association for Asian Studies. “India: ‘The Emergency’ and the Politics of Mass Sterilization.” Accessed April 27, 2023. <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/india-the-emergency-and-the-politics-of-mass-sterilization/>.

Vulnerable groups were targeted, specifically prisoners, poor people, illiterate people, and unhoused people, an outcome that could be considered eco-fascistic. Notably, this campaign was financed in large part by the World Bank, and implemented with the help of the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations.⁹³

India had long been a target of Western population control advocates, such as the core ‘Population Establishment,’ a group of advocates and organizations that worked on population control funded in large part by John D Rockefeller III. This group met yearly in a conference sponsored by Rockefeller, which was a key mechanism through which ideas regarding population control were spread. This group was involved in the formation and evolution of a number of organizations focused on population control, such as the Population Council.⁹⁴ Mass sterilization camps were established in India prior to “the Emergency.” This was due in part to pressure from the Johnson administration, which was lobbied hard by organizations that were part of the ‘Population Establishment’ such as the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations.⁹⁵ These same foundations helped create the infrastructure for mass sterilization in India that was then used to significantly ramp up sterilizations during “the Emergency.”⁹⁶ This policy is an example of how neo-Malthusian thought spread through neocolonial channels and how governments use population policy to further other objectives. India continues to sterilize people at high rates, but has shifted to mostly sterilizing women since the end of the 1970s. It is estimated that 4.5 million

⁹³ Matthews, Dylan. “‘The Time of Vasectomy’: How American Foundations Fueled a Terrible Atrocity in India.” Vox, June 5, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/6/5/18629801/emergency-in-india-1975-indira-gandhi-sterilization-ford-foundation>.

⁹⁴ Connelly, Matthew James. *Fatal Misconception the Struggle to Control World Population*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.

⁹⁵ Green, Hannah. “The Legacy of India’s Quest to Sterilize Millions of Men.” Pulitzer Center. Accessed April 28, 2023. <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/legacy-indias-quest-sterilize-millions-men>.

⁹⁶ Matthews, Dylan. “‘The Time of Vasectomy’: How American Foundations Fueled a Terrible Atrocity in India.” Vox, June 5, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/6/5/18629801/emergency-in-india-1975-indira-gandhi-sterilization-ford-foundation>.

women are sterilized per year and that half the female population is sterilized by age 35.⁹⁷ Poor and rural women are disproportionately impacted by this ongoing policy, as rich and urban women tend to delay the age of sterilization as compared to poor and rural women.⁹⁸

Eco-Fascism in Current Political Rhetoric in the West

While neo-Malthusian attitudes from the last century align with eco-fascism in practice, Hardin and Ehrlich, and certainly populationists, could not have identified as eco-fascists because such an ideology was not yet articulated. In recent years, eco-fascism has emerged as a philosophy drawing on the legacies from the past that has found adherents in today's online communities. This philosophy has contributed to at least three mass shootings: the shooters in Christchurch, New Zealand, El Paso, Texas and Buffalo, New York all self-identified as eco-fascist and referenced Pentti Linkola's writings in their manifestos. For example, the Christchurch shooter, who killed 51 people at two mosques, called himself an eco-fascist in his manifesto and called immigration "environmental warfare."⁹⁹ In his manifesto he said, "The invaders are the ones over-populating the world...Kill the invaders, kill the overpopulation and by doing so save the environment."¹⁰⁰ Just a few months later, the El Paso shooter who killed 23 people in a Walmart said he was inspired by the Christchurch shooter and also called himself an eco-fascist. In his manifesto, he blamed corporations for environmental issues, but pointed to stopping immigration and overpopulation as solutions. He specifically targeted Latinx people

⁹⁷ Chung, Rainjade, Jane Kurtzman, and Steven Brandes. "Hf01-08 India's History of Mass Sterilization." *Journal of Urology* 207, no. Supplement 5 (May 2022): e214. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JU.0000000000002541.08>.

⁹⁸ Bansal, Anjali, Laxmi Kant Dwivedi, and Balhasan Ali. "The Trends of Female Sterilization in India: An Age Period Cohort Analysis Approach." *BMC Women's Health* 22 (July 5, 2022): 272. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-022-01857-0>.

⁹⁹ "What Is Eco-Fascism, the Ideology Behind Attacks in El Paso and Christchurch? | GQ." Accessed April 2, 2023. <https://www.gq.com/story/what-is-eco-fascism>.

¹⁰⁰ Milman, Oliver. "Buffalo Suspect May Be Latest Mass Shooter Motivated by 'Eco-Fascism.'" *The Guardian*, May 17, 2022, sec. US news. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/17/buffalo-shooting-suspect-eco-fascism>.

and referenced an “invasion” from Mexico. Also, he wrote about the lack of willingness for Americans to change their lifestyles to become more sustainable, so the solution was to decrease the population through murder: “Fresh water is being polluted from farming and oil drilling operations. Consumer culture is creating thousands of tons of unnecessary plastic waste and electronic waste, and recycling to help slow this down is almost non-existent... Everything I have seen and heard in my short life has led me to believe that the average American isn’t willing to change their lifestyle, even if the changes only cause a slight inconvenience... If we can get rid of enough people, then our way of life can be more sustainable.”¹⁰¹ Two years later in 2022 the shooter who killed 10 people at a grocery in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Buffalo also called himself an eco-fascist. In his manifesto, he said that he wanted to kill “as many Black people as possible” and blamed the political left for not addressing environmental destruction saying, “The left has controlled all discussion regarding environmental preservation whilst simultaneously presiding over the continued destruction of the natural environment itself through mass immigration and uncontrolled urbanization, whilst offering no true solution to either issue.”¹⁰² Eco-fascistic ideas have found a receptive online audience and have driven at least three young white men to channel their concerns for the environment into racially motivated mass murder. This trend should not be ignored and also raises the question of the role of hypermasculinity in eco-fascistic thinking. While beyond the scope of this paper, the role of hypermasculinity in eco-fascism is crucial to understanding the way that reproductive and other gendered policies could be influenced by eco-fascistic thinking.

¹⁰¹ “What Is Eco-Fascism, the Ideology Behind Attacks in El Paso and Christchurch? | GQ.” Accessed April 2, 2023. <https://www.gq.com/story/what-is-eco-fascism>.

¹⁰² Milman, Oliver. “Buffalo Suspect May Be Latest Mass Shooter Motivated by ‘Eco-Fascism.’” *The Guardian*, May 17, 2022, sec. US news. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/17/buffalo-shooting-suspect-eco-fascism>.

While these mass shootings are extreme examples and represent the fringe of the spectrum of those who agree with eco-fascistic ideas, it is important to see the way that theories that are connected to and associated with eco-fascism also arise in mainstream politics in the U.S. and in Europe. In addition to reproductive control, climate change and environmental issues have been used to attempt also to limit population growth by curbing migration. Some factions of the far-right movement in the U.S. and Europe have seized upon climate change as a reason to not welcome migrants. For example, Marine Le Pen, a serial presidential candidate and leader of the far-right National Rally party in France has linked immigrants to environmental issues. She argues that because immigrants are not connected to a homeland they do not care about the environment. In recent years, Le Pen's party has embraced some eco-friendly policies such as tree planting, incorporating these policies into their ultra-nationalist and nativist narratives.¹⁰³ In line with their extreme anti-immigration position, National Rally politicians have said that strong borders protect France's environment and called migrants 'invasive species' that threaten their nation.¹⁰⁴ These positions and rhetoric resemble eco-fascism in its idealization of the environment as pristine and untouched and its blame pointed towards a marginalized population. Connections drawn by right-wing groups between immigration and environmental issues are all the more cynical given that climate change – driven by Global North industrial policies – is and will continue to be a major driver of migration. Because climate-driven migration will only increase over time, it is likely that this rhetoric will intensify and become more popular in the Global North.

¹⁰³ Onishi, Norimitsu. "France's Far Right Wants to Be an Environmental Party, Too." *The New York Times*, October 17, 2019, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/17/world/europe/france-far-right-environment.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Aronoff, Kate, Eleanor Cummins, Eleanor Cummins, Genevieve Guenther, Genevieve Guenther, Leah Garden, Leah Garden, et al. "Marine Le Pen's Climate Policy Has a Whiff of Ecofascism." *The New Republic*, April 15, 2022. <https://newrepublic.com/article/166097/marine-le-pens-climate-policy-whiff-ecofascism>.

In the U.S., eco-fascistic ideas can be found in political rhetoric and in some cases, in action taken by political actors. For example, in 2021 Republican Attorney-General of Arizona Mark Brnovich filed a lawsuit against the Department of Homeland Security challenging the Biden administration's immigration policy. In his argument, Brnovich claimed that immigration was worsening climate change and environmental issues such as bad air quality and therefore immigrants should be excluded. He wrote that immigrants "drive cars, purchase goods, and use public parks and other facilities. Their actions also directly result in the release of pollutants, carbon dioxide, and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, which directly affects air quality."¹⁰⁵ This narrative is present in the American right-wing media. For example, in 2017 well-known right-wing commentator Ann Coulter published an op-ed in the Daily Caller entitled "Choose Between a Green America and a Brown America." This deeply racist and xenophobic piece drew a straight line between environmental issues and immigration through the southern border saying that "primitive societies have no concept of 'litter.'" Also, Coulter denigrates the Sierra Club for abandoning its anti-immigration stance.¹⁰⁶ This narrative is representative of the broader trend of 'greening hate' or justifying racist, xenophobic, and otherwise hateful positions by invoking the environment. Much of these policies and narratives are explicitly or implicitly consistent with eco-fascistic thought, which is becoming more and more apparent in some right-wing political and online communities. Some elements of eco-fascism are not confined to online fringe communities and cannot be ignored.

¹⁰⁵ Arvin, Jariel. "The Far Right Is Weaponizing Climate Change to Argue against Immigration." Vox, June 3, 2021. <https://www.vox.com/22456663/arizona-environment-immigration-climate-change-right-wing>.

¹⁰⁶ "COULTER: Choose Between A Green America And A Brown America." Accessed March 30, 2023. <https://dailycaller.com/2017/04/19/coulter-decide-between-a-green-america-and-a-brown-america/>.

Whose Reproduction Is Being Encouraged and Whose is Being Discouraged?

The question of population growth in the age of climate change is especially salient when it is considered in the context of pro-natalist policies implemented in countries that have high per capita emissions. In the logic of neo-Malthusianists and populationists, as well as of eco-fascists, the population should be reduced through decreasing birth rates because population growth is causing environmental and social issues, such as climate change and the impacts of climate change respectively. In this logic, it would make most sense to decrease births in places that have the highest impact on the environment, which in the case of climate change are the places with the highest emissions. Yet, neo-Malthusians, populationists, and eco-fascists alike focus on births in (and migration from) poor countries to rich countries, which does not compute with the basic logic, revealing underlying racist assumptions of these schools of thought. Meanwhile, many rich countries around the world are facing aging populations and shrinking or soon-to-be shrinking populations, resulting in policies that encourage births in high emitting countries.¹⁰⁷ This also does not always align with their aid and development policies regarding poor countries in the Global South.

For example, Germany, which once had one of the lowest birth rates in Europe, saw its highest birth rate in 2016 since 1973.¹⁰⁸ This is largely attributed to an overhaul in family policies introduced by Angela Merkel in 2005 which included a year of paid maternity leave, two months of paternity leave, and government supported childcare beginning when the child is 1 year old. Births rose again following the pandemic lockdown in 2020, during which time there

¹⁰⁷ *The Economist*. “Richer Societies Mean Fewer Babies. Right?” Accessed April 30, 2023.

<https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2022/09/15/richer-societies-mean-fewer-babies-right>.

¹⁰⁸ dw.com. “How Has Family Policy Affected Germany’s Rising Birth Rates? – DW – 03/29/2018.” Accessed March 4, 2023. <https://www.dw.com/en/are-family-policy-reforms-to-thank-for-germanys-rising-birth-rates/a-43188961>.

was a nearly 10% increase in IVF utilization in Germany.¹⁰⁹ In 2019, Germany emitted 7.9 metric tons of carbon dioxide per capita.¹¹⁰ Despite the pro-natalist policies that it promotes domestically with the goal to stimulate population growth, the German development agency promotes anti-natalist policies with the goal of reducing population growth in nations that Germany formerly colonized. For example, in Tanzania, the German development agency views family planning to be key to its operations in Tanzania, as it views population growth beyond a nation's 'carrying capacity,' which takes into account ecological impacts of population, to be a barrier to poverty alleviation.¹¹¹ In 2019, Tanzania emitted 0.2 metric tons of carbon dioxide per capita.¹¹² Increased support for parents and increased access to assisted reproductive technologies in Germany are certainly not a bad thing, but they do highlight the inconsistencies in population policies that Global North countries promote at home and the policies they promote in the Global South.

Conclusion

The issue of population growth and climate change and other environmental issues are difficult to disentangle, especially because the connection has been built and now assumed by many in the environmental sphere for decades, based on an old theory of social development articulated by a British theorist 200 years ago. The strength of this connection remains disputed and understudied. The central assumption driving both neo-Malthusians and populationists is that

¹⁰⁹ Thomasson, Emma. "As Births Slow in China and US, Ex-Laggard Germany Bucks Trend." *Reuters*, May 31, 2021, sec. World. <https://www.reuters.com/world/births-slow-china-us-ex-laggard-germany-bucks-trend-2021-05-13/>.

¹¹⁰ "CO2 Emissions (Metric Tons per Capita) | Data." Accessed March 2, 2023. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC?most_recent_value_desc=true.

¹¹¹ Bendix, Daniel. "From Fighting Underpopulation to Curbing Population Growth: Tracing Colonial Power in German Development Interventions in Tanzania." *Postcolonial Studies* 19, no. 1 (March 2016): 53–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2016.1228137>.

¹¹² "CO2 Emissions (Metric Tons per Capita) | Data." Accessed March 2, 2023. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC?most_recent_value_desc=true.

population growth is driving harmful impacts on the environment, which in turn drive negative social impacts. This direct relationship is taken as fact. A secondary assumption is that population growth is inevitable and will continue at an unsustainable pace without intervention. Two things are certainly true: the population is still growing rapidly, and the environment is in crisis due to human activity. However, it is worth interrogating the relationship between human numbers, i.e. population growth, and human impacts, especially in the context of vast inequities in resource distribution. Because of the strength of the assumption that population growth necessarily translates to environmental degradation, critical scholars and researchers must interrogate this assumption and seek to better understand the actual mechanisms that tie, or not tie, population growth to environmental issues.

Hardin and Ehrlich predicted social collapse due to a lack of food, as well as environmental degradation such as air and water pollution, which also would lead to an increase in poverty in the Global South. These predictions were based mostly on theory and projections. These dire predictions did not come true. Population has grown faster than ever before since the 1970s, but so has food production. Food production has actually outpaced population growth since the 1960s. The environmental impact of this is not straightforward because the Green Revolution, which is credited for the increase in food production, did shepherd in farming practices that are environmentally detrimental.¹¹³ The late 20th and early 21st century has also seen significant reductions in global poverty rates. The World Bank estimated that poverty in low and middle income countries, defined as resources of \$1.25 per day per household per

¹¹³ “Green Revolution: Curse or Blessing?” International Food Policy Research Institute, 2002.

capita, dropped by more than 20% between 1981 and 2005.¹¹⁴ During the period in which social chaos was predicted, many people were lifted out of poverty instead.

It is undisputed that the Global North countries are responsible for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions. There are also stark differences between the emissions of the rich in Global North countries and the rest of the population. Also, the rich in the Global North do not all emit at the same rate. A recent analysis shows that the richest 10% of people in the U.S. emit 56.5 tons of carbon dioxide per capita per year, nearly double the amount as the next richest 10% in the U.S and as the richest 10% in Europe.¹¹⁵ If the richest 10% of Americans emit the same per capita as roughly 188 people in least developed countries, is focusing on population growth in the Global South as related to climate change appropriate?

When population control is raised as a possible solution to address climate change, environmental advocates and organizations in the Global North like Population Matters and Population Connections are providing governments and elites a way to deflect their own responsibilities for causing climate change, and therefore giving them a means through which to continue their wealth-generating, fossil fuel-burning, planet-warming economic activities. Shifting the burden to address climate change to the Global South reproduces and compounds existing injustices while also not addressing the main cause of climate change: the burning of fossil fuels. The instrumentalization of sexual and reproductive health services in the Global South opens the door for violations of reproductive justice, where women are pressured to limit their fertility in a way that they do not want to. As the impacts of climate change become more

¹¹⁴ Lam, David. "How the World Survived the Population Bomb: Lessons From 50 Years of Extraordinary Demographic History." *Demography* 48, no. 4 (November 1, 2011): 1231–62. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-011-0070-z>.

¹¹⁵ Sengupta, Somini. "The American Exception." *The New York Times*, February 28, 2023, sec. Climate. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/28/climate/climate-change-carbon-footprint-america.html>.

apparent and drastic, potentially leading to significant migration and political instability in some places, will respect for reproductive rights continue to be respected? The emergence of eco-fascistic ideas from the fringes of far-right circles and the history of neo-Malthusian thinking and positions compatible with eco-fascism in the American environmental movement (which spread to other places) creates a context in which savvy actors could use climate change to justify population policy that is not aligned with reproductive rights.

Governments, political actors, climate advocates, environmental justice advocates, global health advocates, NGOs, and funders should fiercely and deeply interrogate the histories of neo-Malthusianism in influential environmental movements and their implications, including policies that violated reproductive justice as well as contributed to eco-fascistic ideology when advocating for climate action. These actors cannot allow climate change and related crises to be used as justification for the violation of reproductive justice. The expansion of the full range of sexual and reproductive health services, including voluntary family planning and the broader sexual and reproductive health and rights agenda around the world, is necessary, as everyone should have the ability to control their own reproduction as they see fit. However, this expansion should not be tied to goals of addressing climate change or reducing population growth in order to prevent social and ecological catastrophe by governments and NGOs. Scholars and researchers should support the change in narrative by engaging in critical scholarship and research in order to better understand the relationship between population growth and climate change. Without interrogating these histories and ideological connections, governments, NGOs, and advocates who include reproductive health services in narratives of climate crises and imminent existential threats set the stage for reproductive justice to be attacked by governments or other political actors, be that because they do not wish to change their own economic activity

or because they are motivated by racist, fascistic ideologies. In order to prevent climate change from being used to justify such attacks, discussion of sexual and reproductive health, including family planning, must be decoupled from discussion of solutions to address climate change.