

Optimum Population Trust: The Return of 1970s Survivalism, or Something New?

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This article examines the discourse of the Optimum Population Trust (OPT). Using Dryzek's (2005) discourse analysis of 1970s survivalism, I assess whether OPT's work is simply a return to the survivalism described by Dryzek. I look to see how climate change has influenced survivalist discourse in recent years, and at the key role of women's rights and fertility in OPT discourse. The first section gives an overview of discourse analysis and Dryzek's own model, while the second summarises survivalist discourse according to Dryzek. The bulk of the piece is dedicated to OPT's position on today's ecological crisis – that overpopulation is the root cause – and its relevance to political and environmental discussion. I then look at how OPT conceptualises fertility and migration as causal factors of overpopulation, and the implications of their policy prescriptions for women and the majority poor in the global south. I use criticisms levelled at population discourse by feminists, Foucauldians and social justice advocates, arguing that OPT discourse reflects political reality in global capitalism, particularly the need for labour control. OPT produces a morally conservative discourse which simultaneously opens up new opportunities for enviro-discipline around power/knowledge in eco-managerialism, but on closer inspection provides no viable or just solutions to the crisis of global warming.

Discourse Analysis

In *The Politics of the Earth*, Dryzek attempts to map and make sense of the many perspectives on environmental problems which have emerged since the 1960s. To do this he uses a notion of discourse described as “a shared way of apprehending the world” (2005: 9). He continues:

Embedded in language, it enables those who subscribe to it to interpret bits of information and put them together into coherent stories or accounts. Discourses construct meanings and relationships, helping to define common sense and legitimate knowledge. Each discourse rests on assumptions, judgements and contentions that provide the basic terms for analysis, debates, agreements, and disagreements” (Dryzek, 2005: 9).

Dryzek's approach is of the Habermasian School, in the sense that he propounds a form of 'practical discourse'. He sees discourse as a normative procedure in which discussion is aimed at societal rationalisation. 'Communicative rationality', as he understands it, describes “the degree to which these processes are uncoerced, undistorted, and engaged in by competent individuals” (Dryzek, 1995: 20). The idea of 'intersubjectivity' is also crucial to Dryzek when thinking about environmental issues (1996: 33). Analysing environmental discourse is no easy task, as he explains:

Ecosystems are complex, and our knowledge of them is limited, as the biological scientists who study them are first to admit. Human social systems are complex too, which is why there is so much work for the ever-growing number of social scientists who study them. Environmental problems by definition are found at the intersection of ecosystems and human social systems, and thus are doubly complex (Dryzek, 2005: 9).

Discourse analysis of this kind understands reality as socially constructed, and asserts there is no such thing as objective or absolute 'truth'. Instead many intersubjective 'truths' exist. The *meanings* of these 'truths' – how society interprets phenomena such as environmental degradation – are what is considered most important and are constantly contested and reformulated. But in this view discourse is also entwined with political and material reality, and is central in generating institutions and behaviour patterns, so "[j]ust because something is socially interpreted [that] does not make it unreal", rather "it is hard to prove constructions right or wrong in any straightforward way" due to the complexity of all social relations (Dryzek, 2005: 12). By dissecting discourse, it is possible to understand different people's realities, how they relate to and engage with each other in political discussion, and what underlies their worldviews. For Dryzek, environmental discourses can be (messily) defined according to their positions vis-à-vis industrialism, "the long-dominant discourse of industrial society", characterised by its "overarching commitment to growth in the quantity of goods and services produced and to the material wellbeing that growth brings" (2005: 13). The categories discourses fit into are determined by two dimensions. Firstly, is the departure from the terms of industrialism, as described above, reformist or radical? Secondly, is that departure prosaic or imaginative – in other words, does it take current political economy as given? (Dryzek, 2005: 13-6).

Dryzek suggests four questions when analysing environmental discourse. These are: (i) what basic entities are recognised or constructed; (ii) what assumptions are made about natural relationships; (iii) who are the agents and what are their motives; and (iv) what key metaphors and other rhetorical devices are employed? (2005: 17-9). He also provides six questions to assess the impact of discourse, namely: (i) what politics is associated with the discourse; (ii) what effect does it have on government policy; (iii) what effect does it have on institutions; (iv) what are the social and cultural impacts; (v) what are the arguments of critics; and (vi) what flaws are revealed by evidence and argument? (Dryzek, 2005: 19-21).

Using these two sets of questions Dryzek analyses what he calls survivalist discourse, an overview of which is presented in the next section. The task of this paper is to answer the above questions in relation to OPT's discourse, and to examine the areas of convergence and divergence between OPT and survivalists. I do not, however, stick to Dryzek's form of discourse analysis (using much Foucauldian and feminist discourse analysis to deconstruct population discourse and OPT's literature), but his framework is nonetheless useful as a base for understanding developments in and departures from 1970s survivalism in OPT's contemporary work.

I depart from Dryzek's approach largely to address some of the drawbacks in his work and Habermasian discourse theory more generally. Dryzek accepts that discourse is bound up with political and corporate power, institutions and ideologies (2005: 9-10). I tend to agree more with notions that see discursive contestations occurring within and constituted by specific historical, cultural and political contexts, and the idea that language "profoundly shapes one's view of the world and reality, instead of being only a neutral medium mirroring it" (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005: 176). However, Dryzek rejects such Foucauldian ideas of hegemonic discourse and discursive normativity, especially in environmentalism, where he sees differing and competing perspectives as too diverse to be

considered unified and counter-hegemonic (2005: 22). The critique though appears foreshortened, since the diverse environmentalisms Dryzek refers to are in fact contesting a hegemonic discourse, that of industrialism. In light of this, it would appear useful to approach the discourse of survivalism and that of OPT through a more Foucauldian lens, which I do with particular reference to work by Luke (1999a; 1999b; 1999c; and 1997) and Sandilands (1999). These analyses, along with ecofeminist theory, tend to be dismissed by Dryzek, and specifically with regard to their criticisms of survivalist discourse. As will become clear, these perspectives have many vital insights into survivalism, and help explain its continued significance, changing discursive dynamics and the importance of power/knowledge.

What follows is a brief – and largely uncritical – summary of how Dryzek (2005) applies his discourse analysis to survivalism, an environmental discourse predicated on the notion of absolute natural limits to growth (particularly population growth, but also perpetual economic growth). In terms of his categorisation of survivalism, he considers it to be radical and prosaic according to the dimensions of the discourse discussed earlier. This summary sets the stage for analysing OPT discourse in relation to Dryzek's idea of survivalism.

Survivalism

The idea of resource scarcity, crucial to survivalism, is well established. Thomas Malthus' first *Essay on the Principle of Population* was published in 1798, and variants of its central thesis – that population growth would exponentially outstrip agricultural production causing an inevitable population crash – have remained accepted to differing degrees ever since. In the 1970s the population question again took centre stage, popularised by influential publications like Garrett Hardin's (1968) *Tragedy of the Commons* and Paul Ehrlich's (1968) *The Population Bomb. Limits to Growth*, the international bestseller sponsored by the Club of Rome (1972), predicted industrial society would be devastated within the next 100 years due to collapsing agricultural production or a breach of the ecosphere's 'carrying capacity', if population and production growth trends continued as they were. These apocalyptic narratives have continued to the present day. Since 1984 the *State of the World* reports have been produced annually by Lester Brown and the Worldwatch Institute, an organisation which monitors global systems such as forests, grasslands, fisheries and croplands. Authors such as Ehrlich and Norman Myers continue publishing regularly. Survivalist discourse, as Dryzek (2005) describes it, has, however, not been uniform, and these examples offer only a glimpse of some of the more influential survivalist writers and institutions. As with all discourse, it is constantly contested and reformulated. The draconian population control policies and authoritarian solutions proposed by writers such as Hardin and Ehrlich have not remained the norm, especially when limits and overpopulation have entered environmental discourse in the UN and western governments. As will be discussed, the precepts of survivalism – natural limits, population growth as a central environmental problem, and the need for strong administrative monitoring and control – have become widely accepted and formative in

national and international policy-making. As Dryzek puts it, “survivalism did set the apocalyptic horizon of environmentalism, the basic reason why concern about the environment...[came to be seen as] not just desirable, but also necessary” (2005: 30).

Analysing Survivalist Discourse

According to Dryzek (2005: 38-41), survivalism sees ‘nature’ as a finite resource. Non-renewable resources like oil and metallic ores will run out. More importantly, renewable resources like wood and waste sinks are also finite, having ‘carrying capacities’ in danger of being breached by human population and economic growth. People are constructed in the discourse as aggregate numbers, problematically consisting of short-sighted and greedy individuals. People are given no cooperative, social or cultural characteristics. Human inter-relationships are hierarchical and marked by Hobbesian conflict and competition, while those between humans and nature are antagonistic. Aggregates of both human beings and resource stocks are interpreted as statistics to be monitored and controlled by strong, centralised administration. Elites – especially scientists (particularly biologists, demographers and systems modellers) and governments – are given crucial roles as rational and authoritative actors in the narrative. Survivalist discourse is about thinking globally, acting globally. Luke, referring to the Worldwatch Institute’s work, argues that:

For the Worldwatchers, these policy manoeuvres are already, in fact, happening, and, they are, in principle, necessary for real change. Armed with Worldwatch guidebooks, ordinary people are bringing ‘the struggle for a sustainable world’ from ‘villages to the board rooms, from local town councils to the General Assembly in New York,’ because, as Brown, Flavin, and Postel assert, ‘it is only by bridging the vast chasm between the grassroots and international diplomacy that the pace of change can be sufficiently accelerated’ (1997: 85).

The most prominent rhetorical devices employed by survivalists are those of ‘overshoot and collapse’, the ‘commons’, the ‘sinking ship’, the ‘runaway train’, ‘Spaceship Earth’, notions of ‘cancerous growth’ and ‘viruses’, and images of doom and redemption (Dryzek, 2005: 40-1). Take, for example, Brown, Gardner and Halweil’s metaphor for the coming crisis:

As the global population locomotive hurtles forward – despite pressure applied to the demographic breaks – there are hazards on the tracks ahead. A number of limits to sustainability are being surpassed, or are about to be...[A]ny number of [these] imminent hazards could trigger a demographic train wreck (2000: 22).

The Effects of Survivalist Discourse

Survivalism, with its gloomy view of human nature, is unsurprisingly associated with conservatism and authoritarianism. True in the 1970s, it remains so today for Seager (2000), despite moderations. This may be overstated, as Dryzek notes that a number of survivalists, such as Myers and Brown, have softened their stance on more authoritarian proposals in the early days (2005: 37-9). Despite its controversial nature, survivalism has had far-reaching impacts on government policy, particularly as it has gained more ‘liberal’ followers and legitimacy in the 1990s. Developed-world security establishments adopt the message, or at least the natural limits and neo-Hobbesian conflict

dimensions of the discourse (see for example, Hartmann and Hendrixson, 2005). Some UN agencies like the UNFPA, as well as the World Bank, the Population Council and other national and international agencies have based their demographic studies on Malthusian logic (Shiva and Mies, 1993: 277-86), though as Dryzek observes, UN environmentalism forums are now increasingly dominated by sustainable development discourse (2005: 49). In the developing world draconian population control policies have been implemented with varying success, notably in India from 1975-77 and China, though international agencies do not actively condone such directly coercive measures (Dryzek, 2005: 35-42).

In terms of social and cultural impacts, discourses of limits and scarcity have become widely accepted, though there are significant nuances in *how* they are interpreted and politically deployed. In security circles, for example, linking overpopulation and scarcity to violence has gained much traction in analyses of contemporary conflicts such as the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas (Ridgeway and Jacques, 2002: 606-10). This particular strand of theory will be explored in more detail later, as it is relevant to OPT's discourse relating to migration. In others, survivalist limits discourse is seen as evidence for the need to end the growth economy and radically decentralise and localise modern society. Dryzek (2005: 35) gives the example of how many 'green radicals', like Martin Lewis, have been inspired by survivalism.

Survivalism has been widely criticised from the left (including ecofeminists, Marxists, environmental justice proponents and multiculturalists) for obscuring racist, sexist and classist politics within the language of population, and for providing cover for imperialism and oppression. Arguments against population discourse have come from diverse perspectives, including fundamentalist religious groups, free market capitalists and liberals. Dryzek is rather dismissive of dissenters for failing to challenge the fundamentals of survivalism (2005: 48-9). This is perhaps misplaced, as should become clear later in this paper. However, while counter-arguments have been proposed and serious flaws recognised with the limits-to-growth and population paradigm (see, for instance Hynes, 1999), the discourse persists. With hundreds of years of continued industrial and population growth, coupled with visible environmental degradation, poverty and conflict, it has proved politically expedient to state-capitalism. As Hartmann writes:

The myth of overpopulation is one of the most pervasive myths in Western society, so deeply ingrained in the culture that it profoundly shapes the culture's world view. The myth is compelling because of its simplicity. More people equal fewer resources and more hunger, poverty, environmental degradation, and political instability. This equation helps explain away the troubling human suffering in that 'other' world beyond the neat borders of affluence. By procreating, the poor create their own poverty. We are absolved of responsibility and freed from complexity (1995: 5).

The next section gives some background to OPT as an organisation, in order to place it institutionally with regard to survivalism as discussed above. There follows a deeper analysis of wider population politics drawing on Foucauldian and feminist critiques. This is intended to help explain some of the similarities and differences – using Dryzek's model and his conception of survivalism – between 1970s survivalism and OPT discourse, relating especially to changing power/knowledge and

developments in environmental discourse and politics more generally. The final part of the paper looks in detail at OPT discourse around fertility and migration, which will provide more concrete areas with which to compare it to survivalist discourse.

Optimum Population Trust

Optimum Population Trust (OPT) was founded in the UK in 1991 and describes itself as:

the leading think tank in the UK concerned with the impact of population growth on the environment. OPT research covers population in relation to climate change, energy, resources, biodiversity, development impacts, ageing and employment and other environmental and economic issues. It campaigns for stabilisation and gradual population decrease globally and in the UK (OPT, 2008a).

The OPT narrative is one of natural limits and scarcity, with environmental degradation primarily reducible to population growth, consistent with traditional Malthusian analysis. OPT assert that “failure to reduce population is likely to lead to a population crash when fossil fuels, fresh water and other resources become scarce” (OPT, 2008a). OPT also cover economic growth and consumption as a major driver of degradation, and pays homage to *Limits to Growth* (see OPT, 2008e), but population generally takes centre stage. “The Population Clock is ticking” – impending doom inevitable due to the coming “population explosion”, unless urgent action is taken. According to OPT, global warming and climate change present the most dangerous consequences of overpopulation today, the starkest case that population growth is “ecologically unsustainable” (OPT, 2008d). From this standpoint their main aims are:

- Public education in issues of human population and its impact on environmental sustainability;
- To advance research determining ecologically sustainable population levels, and publicise the results;
- To advance environmental protection and sustainability by promoting policies which contribute to stable human population levels (OPT, 2008a).

The populations and environmental systems covered by OPT’s research range from the national (UK) to the global level. This is of course relevant when considering its similarities to traditional survivalist discourse, especially since the majority of its policy recommendations are made towards governments (OPT, 2008f). They provide research on a number of issues considered most pressing relating to population growth. The titles of the different topics have all the hallmarks of 1970s survivalist discourse. ‘Too Many People’ is OPT’s interpretation of the root cause of environmental degradation, while they disseminate ‘Optimum Population’ projections and recommend ‘Population Policies’ to bring these about. In-depth briefings on the causes and symptoms of the ‘population problem’ are provided covering a whole range of issues.

The patrons, the board of trustees, policy directors and the advisory council of OPT make a classic mix of the elite agents and rational actors Dryzek (2005: 38-40) sees as central to survivalism. They include demographers, biologists, other scientists, as well as former civil servants and diplomats. Myers and Ehrlich, two of the most prominent survivalists of the past 40 years, are patrons of OPT. To get an idea of the sort of writing Ehrlich has produced, this extract comes from the first pages *The Population Bomb*, where he later likens people to a cancer:

The battle to feed humanity is over. In the 1970s the world will undergo famines – hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death in spite of any crash program embarked upon...These programs will only provide a stay of execution unless they are accompanied by determined and successful efforts at population control. The birth rate must be brought into balance with the death rate or mankind will breed itself into oblivion...Population control is the only answer (cited in Duden, 1992: 153).

Norman Myers, whose style is less provocative and controversial than Ehrlich's, has for many years been one of the best-known proponents of environmental security (see, for instance Myers, 1989 and 2002). His work in particular concerning the problems of so-called 'environmental refugees' will again be pertinent when examining OPT's discourse around migration and security.

Management consultants, journalists and members of environmental, health and family planning organisations also feature heavily in core positions within OPT. These people suggest a movement away from the authoritarian population control advocates, and come from backgrounds more in line with the liberal family planning era of population politics, which gained prominence during the 1990s. As Hartmann (2006) demonstrates, this period was marked as much by compromise with conservative ideologies and means as with liberal consensus. On the front page of its website, however, OPT is adamant that it is "absolutely opposed to any form of coercion in family planning". OPT do promote family planning, both as government policy and individual choice through education and access to various forms of contraception (see OPT, 2008f), but latent moral conservatism, harking back to older survivalist discourse, underlies much OPT literature, as will become clear in the subsequent sections.

The Population Problem

Populations and People

As with all population discourse, OPT construct people as analytical aggregates, presenting environmental degradation and scarcity as functions of population size and growth. They use masses of statistics, modelling and graphical representations to argue their case (see, for example OPT, 2008b). Such an interpretation of population rests on an assumption, as Thompson (1999: 138-9) puts it elsewhere in a more general context, that people are no different from cattle. Analyses come under headings such as "Constantly increasing numbers" (OPT, 2008b) and "More people everywhere – there's no escape" (OPT, 2008c). This catastrophic and fear-inducing rhetoric is used repeatedly, purporting a politically inescapable reality requiring decisive government action. Options are immediately limited by this Malthusian reductionism. This representation of people as numbers

creates a false equality between them. The fastest growing numbers – in the global south – are problematised, hiding racist undertones. Certain groups are distinguished explicitly. While all people are “climate changers” (OPT, 2008d), women are characterised by their “fertility” (Guillebaud, 2007), children as “dependents” or just as “more footprints” (OPT, 2008c).

The monitoring of population data is necessary for controlling people, and the historical context of ‘population’ is essential for understanding the wider significance of OPT’s work, and how it relates to power and hegemonic discourse. Duden explains how the dominant meaning of the term ‘population’ emerged, changing people into masses of statistics, which could have their behaviours quantitatively analysed and managed (1992: 147-9). In the days of early merchant capitalism there was a crisis of ‘underpopulation’ in colonial territories, where capital experienced chronic labour shortages. Pro-natalist policies were pursued in order to correct the problem, and the value of African slave women was quite literally equated with their ‘breeding power’ (Bandarage, 1999: 25). As Sandilands points out, using Foucault’s ‘biopower’, population politics,

continues to be a mode of regulation, a series of practices of science in which sex is managed, organized, aggregated and graphically compared...according to Foucault, ‘without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomenon of population to economic processes’ (1999: 82).

Today state capitalism requires the management of labour to a far greater extent.

It may seem logical that capitalism would support the constant expansion of labour to hold down wages and increase the size of markets, but this is not inherently true. As capitalism progresses, inequality and extreme poverty continue to rise. While those living in absolute poverty may prove to be of little productive use to the system of profit, the risk of widespread social unrest and instability is considerable. O’Connor (1998: 128-9) has promoted the idea of the ‘second contradiction of capitalism’ in relation to the ecological crisis. He suggests that environmental degradation caused by capital may undermine profits, by incurring massive unproductive costs while breeding social and political opposition. Though capitalist globalisation can be said to be largely responsible for current environmental crises, its logic is to protect economic stability from and over people and nature, hence control over both is given priority (Escobar, 1995: 199-201).

This helps explain why the population argument is employed so much by security establishments – central to maintaining the capitalist order – in the developed world. During the 1990s, against a conducive post-cold war backdrop, the work of Homer-Dixon on overpopulation, scarcity and violent conflict became highly influential in the Clinton-Gore administration in the US. He argued that,

Environmental scarcity can contribute to diffuse, persistent, subnational violence, such as ethnic clashes and insurgencies...[and] may have serious repercussions for the security interests of both the developed and developing worlds. It can cause refugee flows and produce humanitarian disasters that call upon the military and financial resources of developed countries and international organizations. Subnational violence can also have significant economic consequences beyond a country’s borders. (Homer-Dixon and Blitt, 2000: 228).

In an increasingly global political economy this threat takes on even more potency. Furthermore, in traditional *realpolitik*, population size and control over scarce resources are crucial to military power, and may also legitimate enlarged defence budgets and militarisation of borders. While justifying further interventions abroad, environmental security theory also provided plausible explanations for continued civil unrest in the south. Global political, economic and social problems could be blamed on 'natural' environmental factors and a conservative neo-Hobbesian understanding of human nature. These ideas are bound up in OPT's discourse, which understands environmental problems as having purely natural causes, sees the consequences as leading inevitably to conflict (like through migration – a central concern of environmental security scholars), and sees the need for strong, rational administrative action (these currents can be seen in Desvaux, 2008; Guillebaud 2007; OPT, 2008b; 2008g; and 2008h).

Luke develops the concept of biopower further, insisting that it feeds into a new environmental discipline, which he calls 'environmentality'. Power/knowledge forms as 'eco-managerialism', a school of rationalist, positivist science which rotates around the three 'Rs' – resource, risk and recreationist managerialism (1999b: 106-19). Countering the logic of neo-liberal industrialism it points to new types of geo-power, moving towards "full blown green governance" where "[e]ntirely new identities built around new collective ends, like survival or sustainability, can be elaborated by systems of eco-knowledge" (Luke, 1999a: 134). The idea of a new 'green governance' is shared by Sachs, who describes how "[c]apital, bureaucracy and science – the venerable trinity of Western modernization – [have declared] themselves indispensable in the new crisis and promise to prevent the worst through better engineering, integrated planning, and more sophisticated models" (1992: 35). Again this idea fits well with OPT (and survivalist discourse in its more recent forms), in that there is very little challenge to capitalism and capitalist political economy as such, though perpetual economic growth and consumerism are tackled at various points (see, for example OPT, 2008e). Interestingly, however, OPT's literature on climate change focuses more on carbon emissions than on production (2008d), apparently concerned more with people and space than industrial expansion per se. Luke (1999a; 1999b; 1999c; and 1997) talks more generally about overarching environmental discourse (as would be expected of a Foucauldian), and it is worth pointing out that OPT and survivalist/limits discourse do reinforce and feed into a more hegemonic conception of discourse and eco-power/knowledge.

Nature and Natural Relationships

Nature is seen primarily as a finite resource – or capital – for human consumption by OPT. Though limits discourse has challenged Enlightenment notions of continual growth, OPT's narrative still suggests that solutions will be based on the completion of Bacon's vision of complete subjugation of nature to human ends. Any emancipatory ecology is firmly put aside – humanity's relationship with nature is seen as purely antagonistic:

Put simply, humans are climate changers – directly or indirectly the main cause of climate change. Had efforts been made to stabilise human numbers in 1975, when the planet

was inhabited by 4 billion climate changers and modern contraception had arrived, there would be fewer than 6.8 billion climate changers now (OPT, 2008d).

It is humans who are “causing deforestation, soil erosion, increased salinity of the soil, pollution, waste disposal to landfill, desertification, declining fish stocks, biodiversity and climate change”, according to one OPT writer, Desvaux (2008: 1), who continues in true Malthusian fashion to describe how “resource wars and starvation threaten the worst population crash in human history”.

Natural, absolute scarcity is given, the idea of which has, according to Ross, always been used as a “political tool, skillfully manipulated by the powerful whenever it suits their purpose” (1994: 16). It is not simply some natural condition, but one manufactured by capitalism, a condition for, and effect of, social, political and economic inequality. Control and regulation of resources-come-commodities is dictated by the profit motive and economic growth – the central idea being to produce the efficient (read profitable) allocation of scarce resources. It should be noted though, as argued by Hildyard:

Recognizing the existence of socially generated scarcity...is not to deny absolute scarcity...[T]here are, incontrovertibly, limits to the ability of the earth to accommodate human numbers, pollution, resource depletion and other demands on its ‘ecological services’. It is, however, to insist that differentiating between socially generated scarcity and absolute scarcity is a *sine qua non* for any sensible discussion of the causes of ecological degradation, deprivation, food scarcity and other problems often attributed to ‘overpopulation’ (1999: 14).

Climate change is the new scarcity: “the drought this time” as Ross referred to it nearly 20 years ago (1991: 193), and it plays an important role in OPT’s discourse (see 2008d). The importance of ‘climate’ as overarching, homogenising and globalising narrative of all the world’s environmental problems will be discussed shortly. Without suggesting anthropogenic climate change is not a real and serious problem – it certainly is – the catastrophic, fear-inducing and blinkered narrative needs to be challenged. Bad diagnoses lead to bad policy prescriptions, and the stakes could not be much higher for the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people.

There are three related flaws in the OPT population argument emanating from their assumptions about nature and natural relationships. Firstly the deterministic, teleological modelling fails to take into account the possibility of cooperative human agency or social and cultural change. In such a perspective “the existence of nations, the aspirations of communities or other human realities fade into irrelevance when compared to the overwhelming presence of the natural earth” (Sachs, 1999: 35). To believe we can get things ‘right’ by scientific modelling is highly doubtful given the complex realities interwoven in natural and social systems (Thompson, 1999: 142). Social and ecological systems are inherently unpredictable and fluid, and such faith in scientific knowledge appears misplaced, and solutions based on such questionable ontological assumptions are likely to be coercive and counter-productive. The reason Western scientific interpretations of climate change and environmental degradation are so dominant over other social, cultural and historical views is perhaps because they are,

precisely ranked on the scale of power, and they reflect real inequalities not only in the degree of power that different cultural groups have over their relation to the physical

world, but also in each group's ability to make arguments that will reflect that relation (Ross, 1994: 218-9).

The discourse of climate itself is clearly political. The idea that all ecological problems are reducible to or subsumed by climate change is already being used to justify interventions around the world – expansion of biofuels and the new 'green revolution' for instance – reliant on the knowledge of elite western scientific communities. Meanwhile, as climate futurology reigns over environmental policy dictated by the west, environmental disasters are a reality for the poor all over the world every day, not a result of greenhouse gas emissions but of rampant poverty, inequality and exploitation. Climate discourse in this sense globalises the responsibility and costs of what is, historically and geographically, a consequence of a globalised local (western) culture.

Secondly, by using mean averages of people's contribution to environmental degradation, they fail to discern how social, economic and cultural inequalities both precipitate such problems and obscure the divergent impacts on people of different race, class and gender. Structural issues of poverty, patriarchy and militarism remain unchallenged (Ridgeway and Jacques, 2002: 601). The effect of this hole is to perpetuate the idea that the ecological crisis is a result of human excess, rather than anything more systemic in the organisation of society. It helps perpetuate the idea that the poor are responsible for their own poverty, in need of discipline and control, something Hynes strongly denounces: "It strains credulity to equate the poorest, least politically powerful human beings on earth with the most potent industrial expressions of corporate capitalism and former state socialism" (1999: 44). This has been the case in the past too. Since the 1950s, the failure of the development project has been blamed on people in developing countries for outbreeding economic growth, thereby denying any fault in the development model itself (Duden, 1992: 149-51).

Shiva and Mies observe how "Enclosure of the Commons separates people from resources; people are displaced and resources exploited for private profit", demonstrated well by the enormously wasteful use of water in industrial production (1993: 283). As the poor majority in the global south are increasingly denied access to the basics for survival – exacerbated by austerity measures and rising militarism – it is hardly surprising that they begin to exploit their local environments having been pushed to marginal lands, and have more children for their own security (Bandarage, 1997: 159-63). Hynes' critique (1999) of the $I = PAT$ equation – developed by Ehrlich and used by OPT (see Desvaux, 2008) – is both comprehensive and convincing. Adding to other critics she challenges its blindness to history, power, quantitative and qualitative differences in consumption and wealth, its silence on military production and activity, and its overall discursive patriarchy.

Finally, the scientific reductionism employed fails to grasp that concepts of limits and systems of political, economic, social, cultural, and ecological organisation are at least partly socially constructed and intersubjective. Recognising this will help explain the multifaceted roots of the crisis and the possibilities for change. To return to Thompson's criticism of the population concept, people are not cattle – they have and create social solidarities, institutions, knowledges, can engage in discourse, rationalise and adapt (1999: 139). Deconstructing 'nature' and the 'natural' does not imply that such

notions are meaningless or not real, but that such 'truths' are not absolute and open to reinterpretation. As Soper (1995: 141-2) argues, an empirical study of these ideas does not require reductionism to 'laws of nature' unaffected by human agency and culture. The crucial point is that nature can only minimally establish how we react to its limits and possibilities.

Legitimate Knowledge and Elite Agents

Luke describes how power/knowledge in eco-managerialism, based in western elite institutions, plays out:

Encircled by grids of ecological alarm, sustainability discourse tells us that today's allegedly unsustainable environments need to be disassembled, recombined and subjected to the disciplinary designs of expert management...Master concepts, like 'survival' or 'sustainability' for species and their habitats, empower these masterful conceptualizers to inscribe the biological/cultural/economic order of the Earth's many territories as an elaborate array of environments, requiring continuous enviro-discipline to guarantee ecological fitness (1999c: 142-6).

The aim of OPT is to promote population reduction in one way or another. It calls specifically on enlightened elites – governments, politicians, bureaucrats and international institutions – to 'be brave' and act (OPT, 2008f). Prominent members of OPT reflect this. Many of them are very close to power. Jonathon Porritt heads the UK Sustainable Development Commission and Sir Crispin Tickell is former Permanent Representative on the UN Security Council. It is very clear where they see the key area of action and its agents – in top-down, rationalist government. Legitimate knowledge comes from science. Practically all of OPT's research is founded on scientific work, particularly from demographers, ecological scientists and biologists, climatologists, and statisticians (see OPT, 2008b; 2008c; 2008d; and Desvaux 2008). Their role is to analyse data, identify limits and make proposals. Social science barely enters the picture. This helps to explain OPT's assumptions of the antagonistic relationship between man (and I use the word purposely) and nature. It relies on elite male science based on Enlightenment goals of man's domination over nature. Women, on the other hand, "preferring connected knowing and socially useful activity" are alienated and marginalised from such science and its "anti-human and anti-environmental impacts" (Hynes, 1999: 61). Demographic research and population control advocacy organisations have moreover often produced knowledge which sits very comfortably with capitalist interests. Barker (2008) shows how, in the US for example, many environment-population groups have been supported by the Rockefeller and Ford foundations. The influence of big business interests cannot be underestimated, and has led to the co-option of much of the environmental movement into liberal and conservative orthodoxy, ridding it of its emancipatory potential.

OPT also heavily reference UN agencies in their analyses of the population problem (see, for instance OPT, 2000b; and 2008d). This too exhibits how the discourse bases itself very much within the dominant politico-economic paradigm – it is 'prosaic' as Dryzek (2005: 13-6) puts it. The UN emerged out the post-war settlement and reflected the world order of the time. Centred on the nation state, it has promoted a specific form of development around the world. It is unsurprising then that UN

projections of population growth and environmental degradation are firmly embedded in this logic. The other side to this point is to demonstrate how powerful the population discourse already is in international relations. It is difficult to assess how much impact OPT has partly because population talk has been highly influential in security and development discourse for many years. It was by the late 1960s “an essential element of US foreign policy” (Hartmann and Hendrixson, 2005: 219). As discussed earlier this became popular again in the 1990s, and in 1996 the US administration created the position of Pentagon Undersecretary for Environmental Security. Survivalist discourse also appears, though in less crude forms, in UN agencies such as the UNFPA, UNDP and UNEP and at UN events like the Rio Earth Summit, the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the World Conference on Women in Beijing (see Shiva and Mies, 1993: 277-86; Hartmann, 1995: 138-48; and Sandilands, 1999: 85-9). What this all seems to suggest is that OPT and survivalism may be subject to hegemonic discourse as much as influencing it, and the movement away from the blunt population control prescriptions of 1970s survivalism reflects changing global political discourse.

While examination of the overarching framework and style of analysis employed by OPT seems to demonstrate a technocratic way of approaching the population-environment nexus, largely consistent with global hegemonic discourse and power/knowledge, a deeper look into the specific narratives of its work on fertility and migration reveals something more. Here it is possible, in the language, to discern an underlying moral conservatism regarding gender, race and class. This operates, through constructing the ‘other’, to justify what are in practice highly coercive, repressive and regressive policies.

Fertility and Migration

The title of the OPT briefing on fertility (with sections on the UK and the whole world), ‘Youthquake’ (Guillebaud, 2007), gives a clear signal of the type of assessment to expect. Problematising children and those who have children, it conjures up an earth-shattering and cataclysmic image. The report provides fascinating insight of how OPT construct women and fertility, and how conservative gender, race and class prejudices are hidden within the discourse. The word ‘fertility’ – an inherently dehumanising term – plays an important discursive role, as an ecological and security risk, and is one which Sandilands (1999: 89) notes is very rarely challenged. The question should surely be asked though why women’s fertility is so disproportionately targeted over men’s. OPT claim that if “the world’s *mothers* reduce the number of children they have...there could be 1.4 billion fewer climate changers in 2050” (OPT, 2008d, emphasis added). It is indicative too that there is no talk of non-reproductive sexuality in OPT’s discourse. Sexuality, a distinctly human and social experience, is reduced merely to predetermined “heterosexual reproduction” (Sandilands, 1999: 90).

OPT do, however, use the liberal language of women’s rights, writing that

full access to family planning should be provided to all those who do not have it, that couples should be encouraged to voluntarily 'stop at two' children *to lessen the impact of family size on the environment*, and that this should be part of a holistic approach involving better education and equal rights for women (OPT, 2008f, emphasis added).

Sandilands argues that within these sorts of discursive patterns lie an attempted form of reproductive structural adjustment and normativity, where "women and men are to produce *themselves* according to...appropriate gender relations and family structures" (1999: 88). It is coupled with a more widespread normativity to be responsible and a 'good ecological citizen', to accept limits and austerity. As Ross predicted:

Knowledge about global warming will add a new layer of responsibility, a new level of concern whenever and wherever the weather exceeds or deviates from the average, statistical norms, while the disaster culture to which 'global warming' belongs will continue to function as an effective way of symbolically managing the behavior of mass population (1991: 144).

Guillebaud (2007), writing for OPT, claims that "reducing gender discrimination and sexual abuse [and] removal of the barriers to women's control over their fertility" is necessary for reductions in population. The overall rhetoric, however, tends to problematise women's fertility and justifies control, which Sandilands (1999: 86) suggests is made possible through the creation of the 'other', the irresponsible body which requires regulatory intervention due to its unruly and dangerous behaviour. Moreover, Mies and Shiva argue: "The population control establishment [including] the multinational pharmaceutical corporations, are not concerned with real women, but only with their reproductive parts: their wombs, tubes, their hormones and so on" (1993: 289).

Guillebaud (2007) disputes the idea that increasing levels of wealth for the poor will significantly help reduce fertility rates. Rather, he says, "a contraceptive is the best contraceptive" and suggests that this is the key together with better education for women. This demonstrates how blind OPT are to the causes of rapid population growth in the global south, and how population as cause rather than symptom dominates and obscures the latter. Women may want more control over their own bodies, but this is a far stretch from saying that women *should* control their fertility – as suggested by Guillebaud (2007) – "to lessen the impact of family size on the environment". It is assumed that better educated women will practice family planning, that they will realise 'a small family is a happy family'. But this is taken in complete isolation, and will be ineffective if structural poverty and patriarchal power relations are at the same time disregarded. As Hynes argues:

The [population] of most concern – the 'poorest of the poor' – are institutionally powerless yet collectively resilient women who have larger numbers of children for complex reasons that range from immediate survival and necessity to lack of appropriate reproductive health services to coercion by a male partner, patriarchal religion, or the state (1999: 44).

Poverty alleviation is clearly essential, but more specifically it needs to take the form of "equitable income distribution, the reduction of economic inequality, and improvements in women's lives" (Bandarage, 1999: 28-9). OPT, however, do not seem to go much beyond conservative moralising. In

the UK, they restrict themselves to “promoting sexually responsible behaviour”, criticising the “sex culture” and “perverse incentives for having a baby” (Guillebaud, 2007). It will become clear that the lines between fertility in the UK and the world are not easily drawn by OPT when looking at migration, since the UK’s ‘population problem’, according to OPT, is largely centred on the growth of (poor) immigrant communities.

Moving on to education, Mies and Shiva persuasively argue that educated men have not brought about progressive, peaceful, egalitarian and caring societies, so giving educational opportunities is not enough (1993: 293-4). Structural constraints remain, and educating women within a patriarchal, liberal capitalist system is unlikely to bring about serious change. What is more, education often promotes the consumer ethic. Poverty is directly linked with ‘too many children’, while the ‘stop at two’ proposals made by OPT are associated with affluence, giving a particularly classist dimension to the discourse.

The claim that OPT and the contemporary population establishment are concerned about women’s emancipation appears spurious on closer inspection. The reality is that the proposals put forward by OPT are inherently coercive. For people who are desperately poor “there is no such thing as free choice” (Hartmann, 1995: 67). The ‘correct’ informed choice of limiting family size conjured up by the discourse is impossible, but the ‘wrong’ choice is simultaneously made out to be irrational. The ‘other’ is created, “certain *kinds* of bodies, specifically exoticized, racialized bodies that are figured as unruly, uncontrolled, and incapable of submerging their desires to the common good of sustainability” (Sandilands, 1999: 91). These bodies are the ones in need of regulation. Family planning has a distinctly technocratic face, and talk of ‘target groups’ dominates. But when OPT (2008d) write that “it’s not too late to slow [population] down by peaceful means” there seems to be a move backwards again to the 1970s era survivalism. Dryzek observes that Ehrlich, a patron of OPT, in *The Population Bomb* written 40 years ago “countenances compulsory sterilization in countries such as India, which could hardly be effective without a more authoritarian politics than India featured then or now” (2005: 35). In the 1970s India did carry out large-scale sterilization programmes with devastating effects, especially for rural women (Shiva and Mies, 1993: 290).

The way children are constructed is indicative. The young are considered a threat to the environment and by implication to the economy and political stability. This is especially true of those from the global south, where “the youth bulge is portrayed as an unpredictable, out-of-control force... an immediate threat that must be stopped” (Hartmann and Hendrixson, 2005: 226). Despite the apparent equality created by population statistics, people are very much put into distinguishing categories or “problem groups” (Guillebaud, 2007). The poor – mainly people of colour – are the main problem for wanting to improve their lot and breeding irresponsibly. Women are responsible for having children and young men are marked as violent and irrational security risks. These arguments help explain why population discourse has been so easily taken up by the defence establishment. Wars and conflict across the globe are blamed on natural scarcity, from Darfur to Chiapas, exacerbated by climate change (see Klare, 2007). OPT do not talk explicitly about militarism but population discourse has always gone hand in hand with it, and has gained much commonsense traction. Consider Guillebaud’s (2007) description of a “huge cohort of young urban males who, through frustration and

unemployment, even now seek an outlet in violence”, and how it relates to neo-Hobbesian theories of environmental security. Ross tells us that “[t]o read the CIA reports is to see how efficiently *realpolitik* can convert an issue like climate change into a drama of national strategic advantage” (1991: 202). The view of the “overpopulated, environmentally degraded, and violent Third World is politically expedient” (Hartmann, 1999: 2). This securitisation of environmental problems, based on overpopulation, is carried forward into OPT’s analysis of the threats of migration, though such militaristic outlooks are somewhat ironic bearing in mind how environmentally damaging military activity is around the world (see Seager, 1999).

Framed as “environmentally unsustainable migration” (OPT, 2008g) the movement of people is a particular area of concern for OPT. Immigration is likely to contribute most to population growth in the UK over the next couple of decades, so OPT propose ‘zero net migration’. They use images like “a city larger than Cardiff” every year and “more than two Londons” by 2050 (OPT, 2008g). This is reminiscent of the fear-mongering purported by right-wing anti-immigration groups on a regular basis. It is remarkably similar to the rhetoric of Migration Watch UK (to which, incidentally, OPT provide a website link), and specifically the alarm induced by the idea of ‘environmental refugees’ flooding Britain’s borders (see Fielding, 2008). The image is obviously misleading, suggesting that all immigrants, characterised again as the dangerous ‘other’, will all be concentrated together placing severe strain on social and environmental services. The term ‘environmental refugee’ (see environmental security theories such as Homer-Dixon, 2000; and Myers, 2002) has become another form of discursive homogenisation, feeding back into the idea of a population problem in the global south and crucial to the recent marketing of demographic fears (Hartmann and Hendrixson, 2005: 221). These people’s displacement is constructed as ultimately their own fault rather than a consequence of hundreds of years of colonialism, exploitation and underdevelopment by the developed world. Migration then is framed as something to defend against by shutting down and militarising borders. OPT (2008h) urge curbing both legal and illegal immigration “in those countries whose population growth has become environmentally unsustainable”. Immigrants once again provide the scapegoats, consistent with broader narratives in contemporary society, this time for causing environmental degradation at home and abroad.

According to OPT immigration is a threat to Britain, both in itself and as a driver of further domestic environmental degradation. The issue of fertility re-enters the debate, as immigrant families are likely to expand at a greater rate than so-called indigenous ones. More footprints will put a greater strain on the UK environment and resources (OPT, 2008g; and 2008h). OPT largely ignore the fact that non-native people in the UK are poorer than the white middle and upper classes and concurrently consume much less. Instead of recognising this, they accentuate fears about rising crime, cultural tension and violence, unemployment and a growing ‘underclass’.

OPT claim that it “supports immigration” and the UK should go on “doing its share of protecting persecuted refugees as well as welcoming additional skills and cultures to our already rich mix of people” (OPT, 2008g). It seems oblivious to the UK’s terrible record in its treatment of asylum seekers and economic migrants as well as support for repressive regimes around the world. It also fails to

emphasise the number of British people moving abroad, who surely consume more in other countries, while creating less space for indigenous people to live, pushing them to 'marginal lands', not to mention the British (and other western) companies that freely move abroad, exploiting the environment and people of the global south. Freedom of movement is reserved for the rich and for capital, not for those who are desperate. The majority world continues haemorrhaging capital to the rich minority through the hands of transnational corporations. The poor and dispossessed meanwhile are stigmatised for moving in search of better lives, allowing for "their" problems...[to] remain theirs alone, while 'our' problems are foisted off on everyone else" (Seager, 2000: 1712).

Conclusion

Whether OPT's discourse demonstrates a return to 1970s survivalism is a difficult question to answer. It is clear that its ontological precepts are firmly based in survivalist assumptions of natural limits and Malthusian conceptions of the population problematic, and disguises implicitly racist, classist and sexist politics within the discourse. However, 40 years of social, economic and political change across the globe have had their effect on the 1970s survivalism described by Dryzek. OPT do not purport the overtly authoritarian prescriptions for population control as Hardin and Ehrlich did in the early survivalist era. They borrow from and are heavily influenced by 1990s population discourse, particularly neo-Hobbesian environmental security theory, but also liberal conceptions of women's rights which helped inform development initiatives during this period. The fact that population politics and women's rights are highly contradictory in OPT discourse, infused with latent conservative sexism and racism, by no means signals that it is inconsistent with contemporary global political economy and therefore harks a return to 1970s survivalism. The conservatism of 1970s survivalism, however, persists in OPT discourse, as can be readily observed in their construction of fertility and anti-immigration stance. It endures because it remains useful to and consistent with today's social and political order. OPT's discourse reflects dominant political and cultural currents and hegemonic discourse, and this is why I believe it more valuable to employ Foucauldian analyses and critiques to it.

This is my contribution to the debate, for while Dryzek effectively identifies survivalism's discursive characteristics, he fails firstly to appreciate how crucially hegemonic discourse influences survivalism and how significantly it is bound up in power, and secondly in giving a comprehensive deconstructive critique which can be effectively deployed on its modern forms, such as the discourse of OPT. An effective deconstructive critique emphasises not that population growth has no effect on global ecology, but rather that it is a manifestation of poverty and inequality, as are current environmental crises. That poverty, inequality and environmental degradation are inherent in capitalist production is obscured by survivalist and new survivalist discourses. This is politically expedient. In today's globalised world, migration and the control of transnational labour have become a prime concern for modern capitalism, as has the need for a stable and predictable ecology. The scientific

consensus around anthropogenic climate change and its potential consequences have not only demonstrated the potential limits of global capitalism. They have also created new sense urgency, helping to open up opportunities for control through new power/knowledge as eco-managerialism, eco-normativities and governmentality in the form of environmentality, all of which are reflected and reinforced by OPT's discourse.

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