

20. Depopulated Epistemologies: Creative Action, Demographic Change and Social Reproduction (Workshop)

Tim Burger, University of Cambridge

Jacob Bessen, University of Toronto

Reproduction always seems to carry the implication that it is the uncreative, unoriginal counterpart to the more generative, more foundational category of production. By definition, it copies, sustains, or tries to reiterate an initial imaginative act. This common sense distinction frequently serves to justify patriarchal and capitalist exploitation, by invisibilizing the novelty and value of reproductive action. Yet, in spaces of depopulation, the creativity of reproduction becomes acutely visible. Demographic changes challenge the continuity of modes of life and ways of doing things. As a result, reproducing those modes of life demands epistemological creativity and social inventiveness. The threat of depopulation draws attention away from originating action toward the originality of the reproductive action.

Anthropologists have increasingly turned their attention to the social and cultural effects of depopulation with good reason. Globally, societies contend with shifting geographies of economic life, fertility declines, environmental devastation, structural abandonment, and increased mobility. In response, anthropologists have studied these dynamics through optics like the feeling of emptiness (Dzenovska 2020), shifting systems of value (Weiss 2022), or reconfigurations of spacetime (Ringel 2018). This workshop will discuss “depopulated epistemologies” to make more visible the contested creativity of reproductive action. We thus invite contributions that respond to the following questions: How do persons living in depopulating areas creatively address notions of time, space, and history as they contend with these changes? How do they contest regimes of knowledge or systems of values that relegate them to abandonment? How do “depopulated epistemologies” contest notions of identity, possibility, and continuity? What role do the state, kinship and gender, nature, or shifting labour and property regimes assume in depopulating places?

Social Reproduction in a Depopulated Spanish Village

Hadas Weiss, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin

Social reproduction within a capitalist economy is consistent with depopulation and, indeed, implies it. As “all that is solid melts into air”, capital travels in search of profit, leaving human and physical waste and destruction at its wake. One outcome of capitals’ push for accumulation is that, where livelihoods have been based on an industry or agriculture that have ceased to be profitable, people seek out a living elsewhere. Social reproduction theory (SRT) turns the spotlight on the men and women implicated in capitalist accumulation in ways other than waged labor, thereby highlighting the residual aspects of capitalist society. Drawing on SRT, I

will demonstrate how this residue is crystalized in a Spanish village. The depopulation of this village has already been documented by Jane Collier in her book "From Duty to Desire". Collier shows this process reflected in an ideological change she noticed between the 1960s and the 1980s. In this talk, I will examine an ideology that that takes hold of the remaining villagers in the present day, namely of "endurance." My argument will be that endurance reflects the reproduction of capitalism by giving discursive expression to a society it fabricates and forsakes.

That Obscure Object of Population: Notes from an Aging, Shrinking Island
Tyler Zoanni, Universität Bremen

Much work on demography and biopolitics tends to assume that populations are all made up, and readily so, whether through governmentality or data practices. Here, I center the obscure, unstable, and elusive dimensions of population. I do so from the vantage of Mauritius, an Indian Ocean island-state which has undergone dramatic demographic transformations in a few short decades. Mauritius went from confronting the threat of massive overpopulation on the eve of postcolonial independence to grappling with an aging, shrinking population at present. Drawing on public debates as well as everyday family experiences, I consider how the case of a "depopulating epistemology" in Mauritius shakes up aspirations and imaginations of race, futurity, and democracy on the island. I focus particularly on anxieties about the decline of the Indo-Mauritian majority. Much like discourses of White demographic decline in Euro-American contexts, concerns about depopulation in Mauritius are heavily racialized and racist. I argue these concerns reckon with a future defined by the expansion of a minoritized yet ostensibly more reproductive population (of African descent), thus threatening decades of Indo-Mauritian hegemony. Throughout, I point to the instability of population as both object and project.

Subjectivities of Depopulation: Navigating the Pressures of an Eroded Social Order

Friederike Pank, University of Oxford

When depopulation unsettles social orders and familiar structures vanish, navigating social life can become disorienting. My contribution maps the agentive constellations in the social fabric of an East German coal mining town which experienced severe deindustrialisation and population decline after the end of socialism in 1989. The town – once characterised by a multitude of social clubs, cultural venues and festive events – grapples with the erosion of social energy and community engagement, drastically exacerbated by the disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic. As more people leave, pass away or retreat, the pressure to safeguard social reproduction is even more starkly felt by those who feel responsible for making things go on. For them, social reproduction – as the simple utopia of continuation – is something that must be fought for passionately. However, social alliances no longer function as they used to, and efforts to sustain ‘normal life’ often end in frustration due to a lack of resonance and recognition. How do these subjects make sense of their social position as familiar reference points vanish? What kind of labour does community engagement become when agents feel increasingly out of tune with their environment? Finally, what insights might their perspective offer for broader reflections on the pressures of individual responsibility in the neoliberal order?

Sinai Paths: Archives for Survival

Alaa Attiah Mitwaly, University of Toronto

The science of the path “Ilm Eldarb” is a desert knowledge of Tawarah tribes in the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt for moving, herding, and surviving – in short, reproducing life in the desert. As the desert shapes our imagination of depopulation, the science of the path archives otherwise modes of movement, knowledge, and subjects beyond the modern state infrastructure and future narratives that are centered on populating and reclaiming the desert. This paper will argue that the science of the path as an archive of reproduction can be a creative archive for the future, as it keeps traces of all the possibilities that have been marginalized from the present (Besheer 2021). The science of the path resonates with Sufi mythology on wayfaring the path of God. Through Ibn Arabi's writing, I try to understand these traditions in relation to each other to understand how wayfaring on a physical and metaphysical level breaks with modern infrastructures, desires, and horizons. While doing so, Ilm Eldarb offers otherwise methodologies of knowing, reproducing, and moving through the desert altered possibilities.

Production as Reproduction: Historical Consciousness and Agricultural Labour on a Depopulated Island, Azores

Tim Burger, University of Cambridge

Residents of São Jorge, Azores, are confronted with severe outmigration that has cut the island's population in half since the 1960s. My interlocutors frequently expressed their concerns about deteriorating livelihoods and a bleak future in terms of agriculture: they saw fertile land become overgrown, the labor-intensive horticulture suffer from a lack of hands, and agrarian inputs as a costly investment. These visible and palpable changes powerfully emblemized demographic change. Yet despite its logistical difficulties, cultivating land remained a moral, environmental, and economic imperative as it manifested, both materially and symbolically, the very traces of human presence in an emptying landscape. Adding land's affordances for household subsistence and market sale, everyday agriculture arose as the fundamental practice to counteract the negative impacts of depopulation – or at least to create a fleeting perception of agency. Agrarian production (however minor) thus offered a concrete field of action to live out one's consciousness of decline. In that, I suggest, production's social organization, its practical techniques and moral values conflate it with what scholars have usually theorized as 'reproduction'. This paper asks what we might gain conceptually when conceiving of production as reproduction under conditions of depopulation.

Making Ricotta with Baby Jesus: Emplaced Epistemology and the Reproduction of Peasant Personages

Jacob Bessen, University of Toronto

For Suteresi, attaining a post-1960s, middle-class domestic life meant leaving Rabato – the Arabic quarter of the town with houses built directly into the rock – for newly constructed cooperative housing further down the mountain. Yet, nearly twenty years ago, community members born in Rabato began the annual tradition of hosting a living nativity scene (*Presepe Vivente*) in the old quarter. The event not only includes the holy family and their canonical guests, but the entire neighbourhood is repopulated, houses are collectively cleaned and renovated, and the town dresses in the clothes of their great-grandparents as they adopt the peasant roles – shepherd, baker, winemaker. In collectively portraying these figures, they not only insist on a continuity of devalued forms of production and reproduction, but also annually reconstruct an emplaced epistemology – a mode of historicity and collective self-representation – inseparable from the dwindling neighbourhood.

**Fledgling Farms and Failing Trust: Transformations of More-than-Human
Care in the Serbian Countryside**

***André Thiemann, Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences,
Prague (BOAR)***

Extending from an ethnographic case study of the existential troubles of a Serbian farm to continue producing traditional foodstuffs such as pork and frozen raspberries for the global market, this paper examines the intertwining of human and non-human labour (production) with socio-economic policies and care (reproduction). Different waves of state transformation – the build-up and decay of formal employment coupled with the emergence, then exhaustion of the welfare state, its socio-liberal transformation in the early 2000s, followed by its polypore repurposing for illiberal ends since 2012, have led to a strong distrust in the state's will to care for its populations. Significantly, roughly half of the Serbian citizens did not believe the state's vaccination campaign. Mobilisations against political powerholders were framed as care for farming, but more common was exit: skilled and unskilled workers emigrated to Western labour markets, while techno-scientific institutions to mitigate climate change remained underfunded. Seemingly private concerns were thus enmeshed within wider, increasingly dispirited struggles over (post-)truth and trust on the frontiers of the welfare state, agriculture and techno-science.