

The Triad of Furies

Human Overpopulation, Immigration and Reproductive Rights

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The Remorse of Orestes by William – Adolphe Bouguereau. Retrieved from Mythologian.net

This is an abridged version. Read the full piece [here](#).

In ancient Greek mythology, the Erinyes, also called the Furies, were three divine beings tasked with keeping a watchful eye on the demeanour shown by humanity. One way they did this was by listening to grievances from other mortals, to swiftly deliver judgment and torment humans for any transgression they were inclined to commit.

Strangely enough, the myth of the Erinyes appears to show some resemblance to the state of policing of ideas and suspicious vigilance of undesirable notions that has percolated our intellectual discourse. Of course, if the topic of analysis happens to be a catastrophic risk with the potential of tearing down our civilizational project, or even worse, to hurl our species to a similar fate of extinction to that which befell the dinosaurs, shying away from that dialogue might cost us our future.

Enter the contentious triad of human overpopulation, immigration and reproductive rights, a trilogy of subjects that is certain of incurring the wrath of the attentive Furies.

For the last couple of years, I have attempted to get the lay of this land (or minefield) in my academic studies and educational activism, consequently I have come to realise

that where we should have a constructive dialogue, we have prudence instead, seeing that even the most well-intentioned actor can easily be misrepresented.

Indeed, these are not conversations to be taken lightly. Therefore, an examination of the most factious subjects will follow.

The Elephant in the Smoke-filled Room

There are not many topics which possess the latent ability to foment just as much political unrest on the right as on the left. Notably, the conservative authoritarian right (in this case, the profoundly religious one in the United States) was one of the main forces behind the backtrack on population issues a few decades ago due to the famous Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* ruling in 1973, in which abortion rights were under deliberation. In a historic moment, Catholics united with fundamentalist Protestants to oppose the liberalisation of women's rights to voluntarily terminate a pregnancy, (nothing like an agreement on Bronze-Age creeds to bridge that century-old religious chasm.)

Of course, the damage from that era continues to this day, with Trump's doctrinaire-right administration pulling the strings to [block funding](#) for women's health providers worldwide and to direct it to faith-based bodies, while also [reversing](#) decades of progress on contraception, family planning, unchecked population growth and reproductive rights. This all in addition to the role the Catholic Church still plays in [denying access](#) to birth control to millions of women.

By all means, the conservative, religious right needs confessing its sins. However, at the same time, a case can also be made of how ideologies of the "New Left" interfered with efforts to stabilise the growth of our population. Indeed, the appearance of women's issues and the shift to social and racial justice as a priority concern of population groups as well as the insurgency of environmentalists against [discussions of immigration and population growth](#) laid the groundwork to our current state of affairs.

Frederic Myerson summarizes the political divide in their friction with population matters well when he [says](#):

"Conservatives are often against sex education, contraception and abortion and they like growth – both in population and in the economy. Liberals usually support individual human rights above all else and fear the coercion label and therefore avoid discussion of population growth and stabilisation. The combination is a tragic stalemate that leads to more population growth."

Religion doesn't have to be an enemy of population stabilisation. In fact, the [most effective](#) family planning program without coercion took place under the Islamic Republic of Iran. Religious leaders worldwide should take a page out from that book. In contrast, we might just be learning the extent of influence of the political left and how it is stifling civil debate on these issues. Nevertheless, it appears that environmentalists

might need to vindicate Jean-Jacques Rousseau's romanticising of the past, and restore the momentum the population movement witnessed in the 70s.

Difficult Conversations

Official forecasts are projecting [2.3 billion](#) additional people to be born between 2019 and 2050. They will be spread unevenly among the continents, roughly by 1.3 billion in Africa, 0.7 billion in Asia, and 0.3 in the rest of the world. As a result, many uphold that the impact produced by population growth is insignificant (since a majority of those people will be born in impoverished conditions) when compared to the scale of consumption of individuals in rich countries. For that purpose, the argument that the over-developed world needs to reduce their strain on the planet is a legitimate and robust claim.

Nevertheless, those that maintain that it is all about consumption and focus on the hedonistic behaviors of the [wealthiest 10%](#), overlook the fact that most people would live similarly if the circumstances presented themselves, or the fact that "lifting people out of poverty," invariably translates into an increase in personal environmental impact, as Hubacek et al. ([2017](#)) attest to:

"The good news is that lifting people out of extreme poverty has only relative little carbon implications with a projected increase of about 0.05°C [...] However, the situation changes for a policy goal of not only eliminating extreme poverty but also where we move people into, what may be considered as the global middle class [...] we add another 0.6°C by the end of the century."

That is not to say that we in the West and the rest of the over-developed world don't have severe and relevant issues that need to be confronted, which justify the international criticism and the internal admonishment. However, there is an element in our intellectual discourse that has been gaining ground; the conviction that billions of disadvantaged humans live "environmentally-friendly" lives. To believe such a statement is to ignore the fact that the sheer act of survival for millions of humans carries with it a myriad of ecological consequences, an ugly truth preferably forgotten.

For instance, those who wrestle to survive and find opportunities in the formal economy, primarily in developing countries, turn to extractive activities to make a living for themselves and their families. Examples range from the [overfishing](#) of rivers and bays; overhunting through [bushmeat](#) as well as [poaching and trafficking](#); habitat loss due to [subsistence agriculture](#); [slash-and-burn](#) for cash crops, [grazing land](#) for [livestock](#) and deforestation due to illegal logging used for [materials](#) and [cooking fuel](#). These activities conducted by hundreds of millions in their daily struggle for existence might have a lower impact in terms of emissions of greenhouse gases, but they still induce profound ecological repercussions.

Admittedly, it is perfectly acceptable to be critical of the eccentric and shallow consumptive behaviours of the wealthy, but we have to acknowledge the fact that certain actions are dependent on biogeographical characteristics, with those stricken by poverty being generally [reliant](#) on natural resources and ecosystem services for their subsistence, leaving a trail of ecological and [environmental damage](#) in the local to regional level. In contrast, developed nations can outsource a fraction of their footprints [elsewhere](#), on top of their local impact. Nevertheless, distinctions between the two remain.

An illustration of this dichotomy would be bushmeat hunting, an activity [mainly conducted](#) in the tropics by developing nations, which is inducing the extinction of populations of species and creating a predicament that came to be described as “[Empty-Forest Syndrome](#).” When we consider the fact that the tropics embody most [biological hotspots](#), with these presently [harbouring 40%](#) of the entire human population (foreseen to expand to 50% by 2050), we have to be able to name the growth of the human population, along with economic expansion, as factors conjointly promoting the withering of wildlife. It seems obvious, but even the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has been [gradually shifting](#) their attention to rises in GDP and neglecting population in the process.

Altogether, I chose the example of bushmeat hunting since it is discernibly not being conducted by the average European, North American, Australian and so forth. This is an activity culturally connected to the developing Global South, where incidentally most population growth will take place. In any event, demonising the immoderate practices of prosperous countries is adequate, if it follows that we do not [glamorize](#) the destitute in return. Both the excessive consumption by the wealthy and the struggle to survive by a large part of humanity can be traced back to too many individuals requiring some form of natural capital, collectively leading to a [breaching of the biocapacity](#) of the planet.

Another uncomfortable topic that makes the list is immigration. Ever since the 70s, efforts to bring down total fertility rates (TFR) had been an enormous success in many European countries, the United States and Japan. Those accomplishments are on [display](#) in our present day, with 83 of the 201 countries examined by the United Nations presenting below-replacement rates (2.1 TFR). Unfortunately, 62 percent of those nations also have policies to raise their fertilities.

Regardless, these attempts to boost fertility are not [always proven successful](#), and so governments turn to immigration. It is worth noting, in the interest of maintaining environmental stability and living within the means of this planet, to prolong population growth in countries with some of the highest carbon and ecological footprints is not just counterproductive but morally bankrupt. The [ethics of immigration](#) and excessive procreation need to become a central pillar of our conduct, especially within the countries most implicated. That is why there is a [strong case](#)

(more recently [here](#)) for decreasing population growth in high consuming countries and limiting the mass movement of peoples from low-income countries to higher-income countries.

Given this, it isn't surprising that most people refrain from engaging with these issues. Then again, immigration continues to topple the public's concerns as a matter to be [addressed](#) by governments. [International surveys](#) constantly reveal the communal inclination for migration to not be increased and eventually [to be brought down](#). There is no clear-cut solution to the matter of migration, but as the author and political commentator Douglas Murray [asserts](#):

"The first solution is very straightforward. It is that you slow down the flow [...] The second thing is you work on the people who are already here."

I agree with the [arguments](#) that state nations which neglect or fail to attend to the need of stabilising their populations should have no right to claim immigration slots in other countries, or at least those that do should be given priority. Likewise, foreign aid should be directed first and foremost for the nations that are committed to ceasing population growth. These policies would be applied only to economic migration and not for legitimate cases of required asylum.

The way I see it, by shifting the responsibility of providing economic migration to the nation-state, governments would be compelled to act on population growth, effectively harnessing the positive social and environmental aspects of that outcome, including, in the long run, a reduction of the number of people that would resort to moving. This would also help de-escalate tensions regarding the civil debate on immigration, as it would give the power to the individual to elect leaders to provide those opportunities, while at the same time enacting an acceptable international framework to provide equal opportunity for everyone. Still, the last word would fall on any sovereign state to decide to receive or not migrants, because if there is a lesson to be learned from the events that unfolded from the '*migration crisis*' it is that there is a [schism](#) on immigration between public opinion and that of the political class. Moving forward, elected leaders on both sides of the immigration issue should strive to defend the interests of their citizens.

In any event, if we are to stand a chance in creating a better world for all living things, a sensible and humane plan to stabilise and slowly reduce the human population back to a sustainable size needs to be put in place. All of us can aid in that effort by changing and supporting [actions](#) from the individual to the [international level](#).

If there is anything we need, it is conscientious, charitable and open-minded individuals taking the reins of these issues, so that they do not fall into oblivion and usher in a new [slow and unsexy catastrophic risk](#).

We owe it to ourselves and to all non-human life on this planet to engage with these issues so that we might have a chance of bestowing this gift of life, that is so fragile and unique, upon future generations of living beings.

João Abegão has a BS in Environmental Health, a Masters in Ecology and Environment and is currently applying for a doctoral program in "Sustainable Development and Climate Change" and plans to focus his studies on overpopulation. His interest in Human Overpopulation arose from literature like *Life on the Brink - Environmentalists Confront Overpopulation* and authors Jeffrey McKee, Dave Foreman, Eileen Crist, Albert Bartlett, Lester Brown, Alan Weisman, Karen Shragg, and many others whose contributions inspired João to write his own [Human Overpopulation Atlas](#). João plans to continue researching, writing and advocating on human overpopulation and its many implications for the future.

The [MAHB Blog](#) is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org