No Future, No Children?

Towards a Re-Complexification of "Eco-Reproductive" Concerns in French-speaking Switzerland

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Abstract

Although endangered future generations are omnipresent in discourses around climate change, the possibility to opt out of parenthood based on environmental reasons raises ambiguous reactions. Taking up two distinct registers that characterise stereotyped representations of "eco-reproductive" concerns, this article aims to re-complexify how ecologists connect reproduction and environmental crises. Mobilising ethnographic interviews conducted in Lausanne, Switzerland, I analyse how my interlocutors sometimes reproduce or break up with eco-Malthusian arguments. By extension, I explore what it tells us about their political views. Observing that they preconise collective action rather than individual ecological practices, I further interrogate their visions of the future. Producing "counter-Anthropocene" imaginaries more than nourishing a deliberate conviction in "collapse", I argue that reconsidering parenthood allows them to deal with uncertainty and re-establish anticipation.

Pas de futur, pas d'enfants ? Vers une re-complexification des préoccupations « éco-reproductives » en Suisse romande
Résumé

Bien que les menaces qui pèsent sur les générations futures soient omniprésentes dans les discours sur le changement climatique, la possibilité de renoncer à la parentalité pour des raisons écologiques suscite des réactions ambiguës. Reprenant deux registres distincts qui caractérisent les représentations stéréotypées des préoccupations « éco-reproductives », cet article vise à re-complexifier la manière dont les écologistes relient reproduction et crises environnementales. Mobilisant des entretiens ethnographiques menés à Lausanne, en Suisse, j'analyse la manière dont mes interlocuteurs et mes interlocutrices reproduisent ou rompent parfois avec les arguments éco-malthusiens. Par extension, j'explore ce que cela nous dit de leurs opinions politiques. Observant qu'ils/elles préconisent l'action collective plutôt que les « écogestes » individuels, j'interroge plus avant leurs visions du futur. Produisant des imaginaires « contre-anthropocène » plutôt que de nourrir une conviction délibérée de « l'effondrement », je soutiens que le fait de reconsidérer la parentalité leur permet de faire face à l'incertitude et de rétablir une anticipation.

Keywords
Climate change, Eco-Malthusianism, "Eco-reproductive" concerns, Uncertainty, Visions of the future.

Mots-clés
Changement climatique, considérations éco-reproductives, éco-malthusianisme, incertitude, visions du futur.

Future generations have played a significant role in establishing the environmental movement's legitimacy. Future generations being omnipresent in the movement's rhetoric, I have often read signs during climate demonstrations in Switzerland arguing: "you say you love your children, but you're destroying their future." Moreover, environmental icons have repeatedly been represented by children.[1] In this way, yet-to-come generations justify action in the present. However, "should we have children in times of climate change?" is a question that has gained significant attention in the past twenty years. In Euro-American media, multiple accounts raise the environmental limits to parenthood, highlighting dark futures and/or the individual responsibility to limit carbon emissions and overpopulation.[2] These accounts have transformed into public campaigns and communities in various places and countries.[3] So far, the term "eco-reproductive" best encapsulates these emergent concerns around parenthood and climate change.

While "eco-reproductive" concerns are often depicted in the media as a new and radical response to climate change, they do not emerge in a conceptual or political vacuum. On the one hand, they evolve in parallel to the popular notion of "carbon footprint" and scholarly developments in climatology.[4] Surprised that procreation escaped the growing tendency to convert all sorts of individual actions in terms of CO_2 emissions, Murtaugh et Schlax first suggested incorporating the notion of "carbon legacy" into such calculations — namely, summed emissions of a person's descendants.[5] When understood as a legacy, individual carbon emissions far exceed lifetime emissions as they require to be multiplied by 5.7.[6] Surprisingly, these results have not been substantially contested but rather, confirmed by further research. For instance, Wynes and Nicholas incorporated Murtaugh and Schlax's results in a comparative study of high-impact individual actions, an analysis that elevates "having one fewer child" to the highest position.[7] Their comparison appears in most news articles and, as noted by Schneider-Mayerson and Leong, it is interesting to see the striking resonance of the "carbon legacy" through a single study, now over a decade-old.[8]

Leading to "population" questions, the carbon footprint narrative highly resembles a neo-Malthusian[9] intervention into individual reproductive choices. It has been mobilised by the GINKS (Green Inclination No Kids), a movement which originated in the United States in 2011 under the impulse of the journalist Lisa Hymas, also part of the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT). Quoting Stephanie Mills' famous "the most humane thing to do is to have no children", Hymas explicitly reactivated discourses held by environmental activists who advocated for population degrowth.[10] In her view, environmental and reproductive issues are intrinsically connected since the latter necessarily harms the former.

On the other hand, "eco-reproductive" concerns sometimes actualise reproductive justice claims. In the 1990s, feminists of colour in the United States established a reproductive justice (RJ) framework in reaction to the reproductive rights movement.[11] RJ activists contested the strong emphasis on individual choice vehiculated in the rights discourse and claimed that the right to have children was as important as the right to not have children.[12] The environment was a nodal component of their preoccupations, as pollution and other massive ecological degradations were major barriers to conceiving and bearing children in good living

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[1] Lakind, 2020.
[2] See Courtenay-Smith and Turner, 2007; Hymas, 2010; Hunt, 2019; Taylor, 2019; Wei, 2020.
[3] See BirthStrike in the United Kingdom, GINKS and Conceivable Futures in the United States, "NoFutureNoChildren in Canada.
[4] See Turner, 2014; Whitington, 2016.
[5] Murtaugh and Schlax, 2009.
[6] *Ibid*.
[7] Wynes and Nicholas, 2017.
[8] Schneider-Mayerson and Leong, 2020, 1012-1013.
[9] "Neo-Malthusianism" refers to the ideology inherited from the economist T. Malthus and connecting population growth to various woes such as poverty and natural resources depletion. To designate specifically the mobilization of "population" arguments by environmental movements, I will rather use the term "eco-Malthusianism".
[10] Hymas, 2010.
[11] Lappé et al., 2019, 135.
[12] Luna and Luker, 2013, 328-329.

conditions. Following the same logic, in a context where the future is increasingly perceived as uncertain, political movements such as BirthStrike and Conceivable Future use reproduction to raise awareness about climate emergency. In this regard, emergent "eco-reproductive" concerns fall within older claims highlighting the complex environment-reproduction relationships.

Unsurprisingly, the diffuse and transnational discourse around "eco-reproductive" concerns is also observable in French-speaking Switzerland. Local newspapers and media have raised the question on several occasions.[13] While there are no campaigns or communities resembling what emerged in other American and European countries, some environmental activists addressed the question of "having children today" within their working groups. Realising that they had more questions than clear political demands, their exchanges remained at the level of internal discussions. "Eco-reproductive" concerns also appeared during climate trials, notably to defend activists' civil disobedience actions.[14] Echoing many informal discussions that I had during research, the book written by the French author and political scientist Emmanuel Pont *Faut-il arrêter de faire des enfants pour sauver la planète ?*[15] sat on the first shelf of the cantonal library in Lausanne.

While the topic is often the object of public and private discussion, it is much more delicate to comment on its treatment and reception. Being personally active in feminist and various collectives since 2019, I am familiar with the Swiss Romand alternative political micro-world.[16] I have often talked about my research to people who are in any way close to this milieu. There, I have regularly encountered very enthusiastic reactions confirming the importance of the topic. Without having necessarily changed their reproductive plans, people confess that they have already thought about it or have heard some friends made those decisions. "Who hasn't asked this question today, in our circles at least?," an activist once told me. Simply put, these interrogations almost belong to the realm of the "evidence" for ecologist activist circles.

In contrast, I also faced surprised, sceptical, disapproving and even mocking responses, notably in the academic sphere. Generally coming from older men, these remarks showed not only that they had not heard about this phenomenon, but that they had strong opinions about it: these young people are irrational collapsologists, they mention ecology just to find an excuse for not having a baby and they will necessarily change their mind when getting older. The media also offered stereotyped representations. To give only one example, the title of an article in the Swiss newspaper *Le Temps* read "When women don't have children for ecology".[17] Trying to heat the crowds, the journalist continued: these "écolos-féministes" are turning their backs on motherhood to lighten their carbon footprint in the name of global warming and rampant overpopulation. "Welcome to the new crusaders of the cross" signs the author. These strong judgments show that "eco-reproductive" concerns also belong, for some, to the realm of the "unthinkable".

In this article, I explore the ambiguity that characterises the social representations of "eco-reproductive" concerns. How is it that people who question their desire to become parents based on ecological consideration trigger antagonistic reactions, evident for some, unthinkable for others? More specifically, negative reactions delineate two distinct registers that will structure my analysis. Firstly, "eco-reproductive" concerns are presented as a populationist intervention and their proponents as convinced eco-Malthusians who think that regulating their reproduction is a solution to limit global carbon emissions. Secondly, they are portrayed as "collapsologists" who believe in the "end of the world" to such an extent that they forgo parenthood. Responding to these stereotypes, this research firstly attempts to describe my interlocutors' views to re-complexify how people connect reproductive intentions and environmental crises. Rather than trying to establish a causal relationship between climate change and sterility, I look at how environmental concerns have entered the ways ecologists think about reproduction. By extension, I am interested in what it tells us about their political views, the role played by global population numbers and individual carbon footprint in

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[13] See Rambal, 2016; Magnollay, 2019; Mamarbachi, 2020; Seppey, 2022; Liechti, 2022.
[14] Demay and Krähenbühl, forthcoming.
[15] Pont, 2022.
[16] See reflexivity and positionality subsection, pp. 10-11.
[17] Rambal, 2016. The original title in French is: "Quand les femmes ne font pas d'enfant pour l'écologie".

climate change mitigation, as well as their distribution of responsibility. Lastly, I examine their visions of the future to assert whether uncertainty or a deliberate conviction in collapse underlie their interrogations around parenthood.[18]

GOING BEYOND REPRODUCTIVE DECISION-MAKING, ECO-MALTHUSIANISM, AND "*COLLAPSOLOGIE*"[19]

Eco-reproductive concerns

When I started working on these issues in 2020, I faced a scholarly blind spot. Since then, "eco-reproductive" concerns have progressively marked their entrance into social science research. Quantitative studies conducted in Canada, Europe and the United States have looked at the occurrence of "eco-reproductive" concerns and asked whether climate change impacts the reproductive plans of ecologists and non-ecologists.[20] The studies targeting ecologists and college students found a positive relationship between environmental concerns and reproductive preferences. More precisely, Schneider-Mayerson and Leong found that concerns over the future well-being of children were more influential than concerns over the carbon footprint of future babies.[21] On the contrary, De Rose and Testa, who used existing statistical data from the Eurobarometer survey, found no correlation between the two.[22] In other words, for lay people, environmental preoccupations do not translate into revised reproductive plans, i.e. having no children or fewer than expected. Bodin and Björklund's focus group study confirms that climate awareness does not alter reproductive decision-making.[23] Nevertheless, they found that it affects the way people reason about reproduction as they implicitly find ways to justify their own decisions and position themselves against some arguments.

Through ethnographic research, Dow has also highlighted the importance of uninhabitable futures in the ways people think about reproduction alongside their everyday ethics.[24] She argued that Spey Bay's (Scotland) inhabitants' quest for a "good" place to live provides an example of how building a "stable environment" has become nodal in their reproductive plans. While kinship has been traditionally approached as the transmission of genes and patrimony, Dow underlines that contemporary conceptions are marked by the inheritance of environments. The question is "not whether a particular constellation of sperm, egg, and uterus will create a baby, but whether a person born in the future will be able to make a good life".[25] Nevertheless, except for her work, anthropological scholarship on this topic is scarce. Following her call to ask what our ideas about reproduction tell us about ourselves, there is a need to go beyond the strict "decision-making" perspective to capture more complex entanglements on how people connect reproduction and environmental crises.

About what these changing conceptions of reproduction tell us, Schneider-Mayerson[26] has argued that it offers a new perspective on ecologists' political engagement. Observing that there is currently no scholarship on birth strikes as a form of environmental politics and little understanding of how people negotiate reproductive choices amid climate change, Schneider-Mayerson posited reproductive plans as a socio-political tool. In other words, these behaviours have entered the ways in which ecologists think of themselves

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[18] In this article, I have decided to focus on these two dimensions relative to the environment-reproduction relationship. Nevertheless, part of the negative reactions are the product of the gendered sexual division of labour, assigning women to the reproductive role. Hence, looking at other motivations to interrogate parenthood, such as gender inequalities, is necessary to re-complexify "eco-reproductive" concerns. For a more complete analysis, see Krähenbühl, 2022.

[19] Similarly to Chamel (2021b), I use the French expression "collapsologie" because I refer to a specific type of "catastrophism" that has emerged in France and that has not yet an equivalent outside French-speaking worlds.

[20] Arnocky et al., 2012; De Rose and Testa, 2013; Schneider-Mayerson and Leong, 2020. Throughout the paper, I use "ecologists" to refer to people who care about ecology and environmental crises.

[21] Schneider-Mayerson and Leong, 2020.

[22] De Rose and Testa, 2013.

[23] Bodin and Björklund, 2022.

[24] Dow, 2013, 2016a, 2016b.

[25] Dow, 2016b, 654.

[26] Schneider-Mayerson, 2022.

and act as environmental political actors. He suggested that the entry of reproductive desires into environmental micropolitics is a contribution to the "scholarly blind spot concealing the intersection of private action and movement participation, personal change and social change."[27] This perspective has been helpful to analyse my interlocutors' narratives in relation to their views of environmental politics, climate responsibility, and envisioned solutions. Nevertheless, Schneider-Mayerson's work lacks a critical perspective on the contemporary mobilisation of eco-Malthusian discourses. In his collaborative research with Leong, they merely say that the application of the individualised "carbon footprint" to reproductive choices pertains in some ways to a form of decades-old Malthusian concern about "overpopulation", and that potentially, it marks the emergence of a new concept.[28] However, to maintain feminist and intersectional perspectives, we must relocate "eco-reproductive" concerns within the wider debate on "population" within the Anthropocene.

We are too many on Earth

Far from being new, the entanglement between demography, reproductive justice, and environmental depletion is inseparable from histories of colonial violence, systemic racism, and patriarchal domination. Following Malthus' legacy, the idea that population growth fosters the destruction of the environment impeded north American environmental movements in the second half of the 20th century. For international agencies, the protection of the environment, alongside many other objectives such as poverty reduction, justified coercive birth control policies targeting racialised and marginalised women in the "Global South" and the United States.[29] Because the long-term ideological association between human birth rates and environmental destruction has led to the control of women's bodies, feminist and critical scholars tended to avoid this question. Indeed, feminist critiques emerged until the end of the 1990s[30] to condemn population control policies but they were followed by what Clarke and Haraway characterized as a "booming silence".[31] Somehow, by developing a powerful critique of population control, this literature blocked the way to analysis that would engage with populationist discourse (except to condemn it).

However, in recent years, the population-environment relationship has again been treated as an object of academic discussions. On the one hand, denouncing this lack of interest, some scholars have argued that silencing population-environment linkages was equally problematic for reproductive justice.[32] We should not neglect the pressure of the rapid growth in human numbers on natural resources, non-humans, and poorer communities standing at the receiving end of extractive and polluting activities. Others, adopting a feminist political ecology approach largely inspired by the anti-population control positions developed in the 1980-90s, denounced that climate change and the "Anthropocene" are powerful narratives that dangerously re-actualise Malthusian thinking.[33] According to them, such discourses naturalise the causes of environmental degradation instead of pointing at the political power relations. Indeed, IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) and UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) reports, as well as research in climatology, argue that there is a positive relationship between global CO_2 emissions and population growth.[34] In the face of climate emergency, slowing population growth appears as an adequate solution since it "could provide 16-29% of the emissions reductions suggested to be necessary by 2050 to avoid dangerous climate change".[35]

Researching young environmental activists in the United States, Sasser demonstrated that "[overpopulation] is a long-enduring narrative that permeates ecological sciences, international development, and everyday

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[27] Haenfler et al., 2012, 2 *in* Schneider-Mayerson, 2022, 4.
[28] Schneider-Mayerson and Leong, 2020, 1012.
[29] Robertson, 2012; Bashford, 2014.
[30] See Hartmann, 1987; Bandarage, 1997; Silliman and King, 1999.
[31] Clarke, 2018.
[32] Haraway, 2016, 2018; Clarke, 2018.
[33] Sasser, 2018; Murphy, 2018; Ojeda et al., 2020; Bhatia et al., 2020.
[34] UNFPA, 2012; IPCC, 2014; O'Neill et al., 2009, 2012; O'Neill and Bongaarts, 2018.
[35] O'Neill et al., 2010, 17521.

conversations about the environment".[36] Contemporary eco-Malthusianism, which she calls "populationism", similarly attributes social and ecological problems to human numbers but merely abandoned the language of coercion to adopt the reproductive rights paradigm consecrated at the Cairo conference in 1994.[37] Following these attempts to identify forms of "populationism", this article aims to explore to what extent "eco-reproductive" concerns are based upon or lead to explicit eco-Malthusian arguments.

The end will come soon

Like environmentalism's reliance on eco-Malthusian discourses, the term "catastrophe" has been omnipresent in the movement since the 1970s, distinguishing modern environmentalism from earlier forms of conservationist or preservationist activism.[38] "Collapse" has been used less as a precise scenario than a powerful warning, working as a repellent invocation that does not have to be explained in detail.[39] While imaginaries of ecological doom have largely been inspired by those of nuclear apocalypse that developed during the Cold War, the political landscape of "catastrophism" has rapidly evolved in the last decade. Even though the two have been in competition to mirror ideas of planetary crisis, the slow disaster of the Anthropocene is progressively replacing the rapid nuclear extinction.[40] Conscious immersion in uncertainty and rising risk has replaced imaginaries of "a one-way trip to doom".[41]

According to some authors, environmentalism is progressively entering a postapocalyptic phase. Cassegård and Thörn argued that, next to apocalyptic warnings, the idea that "catastrophe" is not a future threat, but a present reality has emerged in radical environmental activism.[42] Referring to the changes *already* occurring in some "Global South" countries, postapocalyptic discourses focus on adaptation to loss. Developing the examples of the Dark Mountain project and the International Tribunal for the Rights of Nature, the authors suggest that this type of activism is observable in groups who lack trust in the established institutions governing the environment. Less interested in discourses, de Moor explored how postapocalyptic environmentalism is spreading in different groups across five European cities.[43] He observed that the idea that "collapse is already here" was very much present in the field. However, it remained unspoken and largely experienced at the individual level. Collectively, these groups maintained that they should focus on climate mitigation rather than turning their efforts to adaptation activism.

In France, a new type of "catastrophism" is also spreading since the years 2010s with the emergence of "collapsologie". Advocating for a "science of collapse", Servigne and Stevens established the term in their popular book *Comment tout peut s'effondrer*.[44] The notion spread rapidly through virtual communities and the Transition movement to become an umbrella term to describe different discourses around the question of "collapse". According to Tasset,[45] what is going on since 2015 differs from previous movements, notably the one studied by Semal from 2005 to 2012,[46] in which collective action was presented as the solution to "collapse". Since then, "collapse" has been detached from the notion of collective action and has become autonomous (and inevitable at the same time). As suggested by Tasset, "collapsologie" has developed in response to the apparent gap between institutional slowness and the material reality of environmental changes.[47] In other words, similarly to what Cassegård and Thörn observed, this gap now characterises

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[36] Sasser, 2018, 2.
[37] The International Conference on Population and Development marked in 1994 the transition from a regime where demographic control was clearly assumed to a regime where it was camouflaged by the vocabulary of human rights.
[38] Cassegård and Thörn, 2018, 562.
[39] Semal, 2017, § 10.
[40] Masco, 2015.
[41] Buell, 2010.
[42] Cassegård and Thörn, 2018.
[43] De Moor, 2022.
[44] Servigne and Stevens, 2015.
[45] Tasset, 2019.
[46] Semal, 2019.
[47] Tasset, 2019.

environmental politics and illustrates political institutions' failure to take sufficient measures, which in return nourishes new types of "catastrophism".

From a strategic point of view, impending global doom as a tool to rouse action and mobilise support continues to be the object of controversies. De Moor's study shows it well, incorporating the idea that "collapse is happening now" in strategizing is seen as something that would lead to hopelessness and demobilization. The critiques of contemporary "catastrophism" and the general reluctance of scholars to admit the legitimacy of those who are now called "collapsologists" are additional elements that exemplify the difficulty to break down the "transition or collapse" binary, to accept a catastrophism that would not be enlightened or rational.[48] However, research has also shown that postapocalyptic activism could spread hope and largely contributes to building alternatives and imagining post-capitalist societies.[49] As Chamel puts it, we need to move beyond representations of "collapsologists" as people who believe in "the end of the world" as they activate imaginaries of resurgence.[50] In other words, contemporary "catastrophism" may open the futures instead of merely closing them down.

What is also at stake is the degree of certainty of "catastrophe". Unsurprisingly, this prospective question cannot be answered, referring less to calculable risks than to the dismantlement of globalised industrial civilization. Nevertheless, different actors' views about the degree of certainty of "catastrophe" constitute an object of inquiry. Indeed, "visions of the future", or argumentative regimes, have particularly interested Chateauraynaud, from a pragmatic sociology perspective.[51] Looking at the conditions of production and diffusion of alerts and political controversies, "visions of the future" are enlightening as they confront different ways to look at the causes and consequences of a particular situation. Therefore, seriously considering how people try to imagine the future to overcome the ontological gap between what is existing and what will exist is crucial to understand present action.[52] Indeed, possible worlds which are not yet realised and hoped for futures inform people's actions and organise social life.[53] To follow the call to complexify contemporary beliefs about "the end of the world", I will specifically mobilise the typology of Chateauraynaud and Debaz[54], as well as Dousset's heuristic of uncertainty.[55] That way, looking at my interlocutors' relationship to the future allows me to locate them on the political scene of "collapse" and ecology. Furthermore, this perspective offers the reader to escape the idea according to which renouncing to parenthood would equate to a desperate act of disengagement from life itself.

METHODOLOGY

Where to look for "eco-reproductive" concerns?

Exploring how ecologists conceive reproduction in relation to climate change, I was looking for individual narratives and experiences around questions ranging from parenthood to environmental concerns. Therefore, semi-structured in-depth interviews were the most appropriate method. Nevertheless, what was less clear was "where to find my interlocutors". Contrarily to the formation of public campaigns and support groups in other countries, no collective action around "eco-reproductive" concerns existed in Switzerland. Thus, my interest was directed at a very diffuse phenomenon, located in the intimate sphere of private negotiations around procreation. Furthermore, this exploratory research aimed to collect a variety of experiences. For that reason, all I asked my interlocutors was to be unsure about becoming biological parents as stemming mainly from environmental reasons. In other words, my interlocutors did not need to have made a firm decision, nor to

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[48] See Charbonnier, 2019; Dupuy 2002 *in* Garapon 2020.
[49] Semal, 2017, Chamel, 2019, 2021a, 2021b; Tasset, 2019; Li Vigni et al., 2022.
[50] Chamel, 2019, 2021a, 2021b.
[51] Chateauraynaud, 2013, 2019; Chateauraynaud et Debaz, 2017, 2019; Chateauraynaud and Torny, 1999.
[52] Chateauraynaud, 2013.
[53] Strathern, 2005, 51; Johnson-Hanks 2002.
[54] Chateauraynaud and Debaz 2017, 2019.
[55] Dousset, 2018, 2019.

have done so *only* based on environmental motives. As I will develop in the rest of the article, these open-ended criteria led to an assorted set of interviews, notably in terms of politicization.

In Lausanne, the second most populated city in French-speaking Switzerland, where this research has been mostly conducted, the environmental movement experienced a major uprising in 2018. Alongside Fridays For Future, different collectives have been constituted, such as la Grève du Climat, la Grève pour l'Avenir and an Extinction Rebellion group. The ZAD (Zone à Défendre) that was established nearby the city in 2020 also participated in enriching the political landscape of the region. In this context, it would not have been difficult to identify environmental activists, a social group which is the most prone to change their reproductive plans because of environmental crises according to existing scholarship. Nevertheless, if I decided to limit my research to the views of people who factor the environment in their reproductive choices, I considered that a strict focus on activists would be reductive. In other words, what mattered was that my future interlocutors care about the environment, not that they are active in any social movements. At the same time, activist circles constituted an important gateway to contact people who experience "eco-reproductive" concerns.

Hence, my primary entry point was an ecofeminist gathering held in Lausanne in July 2020. Lasting 10 days, the organization of the camp was horizontal and participants were invited to set up workshops on a variety of topics. There, I convened a collective discussion about "having children today" and I stayed in touch with some participants with whom I conducted interviews a few months later. Secondly, friends of mine referred me to people who felt concerned by these questions. This started a snowball effect, and most of my interlocutors introduced me to friends of theirs. In total, I conducted fourteen in-person interviews (except for one) between November 2020 and March 2021 (6 cisgender men, 7 cisgender women, and 1 trans non-binary person). All the interviews, lasting between 50 minutes and 2 hours, were recorded, transcribed and organised by theme. Among a wide range of questions, the following points were systematically covered: Have they ever wanted kids? What are the different reasons explaining their childlessness? Since when are they concerned about the environmental situation? How do they connect human reproduction and environmental change?

Because of the snowball effect, some of my interlocutors knew each other. They do not constitute a group as such in the sense that they do not work together to address "eco-reproductive" concerns. Instead, they are a heteroclite group, their main common denominator being their interrogation about parenthood amid environmental uncertainty. Despite the heterogeneity in terms of reproductive desires,[56] they were all white, privileged and leftists. In terms of socio-economic profiles, they correspond to the larger picture of childfree people, characterised by less conventional gender roles, lower levels of religious observance, urban residency, greater financial stability and professional employment, and a higher level of education.[57]

Regarding their socialization to ecology, they systematically referred to what they call "*prise de conscience écologique*" (ecological awareness), described as the moment when they realised the extent of environmental crises and integrated this component into their daily life. Examples of such integration varied from consumption practices, political engagement in climate strikes, animal rights movements or green parties, educational choices, and changes in professional trajectory. Nevertheless, the pathway towards such awareness differed. Some described a long process that began in childhood as they grew up in a family in which environmental values were shared and taught. In such cases, they would typically find it difficult to trace back their awareness, saying "I have always been sensitive to ecology". Others did not mention their education but remembered a much more precise moment – a documentary, reading, IPCC report, college course, discussion. Overall, the social mobilizations that have shaken up Switzerland in 2018, originating in

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[56] For instance, some of them were certain to remain childfree when others still wanted to have kids. Additionally, environmental motives did not play the same role for all. They were sometimes the catalyst to opt-out parenthood, sometimes one reason among others. To understand their pathways to environmental childlessness, see Krähenbühl 2022.

[57] Basten, 2009. I mention this to describe them more than to comment on my interlocutors' representativeness of the general population. Adopting an anthropological perspective, I was not looking for a representative sample.

the international Fridays for Future movement, were regularly mentioned to explain how they got aware of climate change. Without any linearity or causality,[58] these distinct points of departure led to different political views on the relationship between procreation and environmental crises.

Reflexivity and positionality

Grounded in standpoint epistemology, this research adopts "reflexivity" as a method capable to produce and collect ethnographic material outside the "neutrality ideal".[59] Instead of considering that knowledge is produced in a vacuum, created by the extraction from the observation site of the researchers' preconceptions and social positions, this methodological approach centres on the interaction between researchers and their interviewees, as well as on a close analysis of the researcher's relationship to the research object.

Beyond my personal political views,[60] which I necessarily had to reflect upon to carry out the analysis, "eco-reproductive" concerns generate "right or wrong" responses. I sometimes found myself trapped, trying to reply to "is it correct to believe in 'collapse'?", a prospective question that has no possible answer. On the one hand, "catastrophism" infuses environmental movements since the 1970s and has entered "common sense".[61] As highlighted by Chateauraynaud and Debaz, from the activists' perspective, not choosing one side and maintaining distance is equivalent to playing the game of the guardians of the economic and political order.[62] On the other hand, scholars are expected to divert the public from its catastrophist temptations, as part of their function to maintain a democratic regime.[63] To overcome this dichotomic division of labour, I agree with Allard and his colleagues that the question is not "what to think of collapse" but "what does collapse do and what do those affected by this idea".[64] Nevertheless, the boundary between the two is thin, especially as I share a lot with my interlocutors.

Finally, my implication in feminist collectives and alternative movements in Lausanne eased my access to research interlocutors. While I did not know them personally, being immersed in those relatively small circles made it easier to identify ecologists experiencing "eco-reproductive" concerns. Indeed, Lausanne is a small city and its leftist scene forms a condensed network of interpersonal relationships. Beyond the practical access to my interlocutors, it is important to reflect upon how they perceived me. Undoubtedly, they identified me as "one of them", either because we had friends in common or have met in other circumstances before the interview. This has led to trust but also implicit knowledge, making it sometimes difficult to capture their political affinities. They thought that we may have the same opinions, and I probably assumed the same from time to time.

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[58] Here, I mean that I have not tried to understand what types of socialization (early or late) led to what views, observing that these were not obvious and did not seem to play a role.

[59] See Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992a, 1992b.

[60] While it is of no interest for the reader to know whether or not I wish to have children, my proximity with different social movements, as well as with some of my interlocutors may be of interest to shed light on my analysis. Both my activism and my academic work played a significant role in shaping my understanding of environmental crises. From a feminist political ecology perspective, I believe that environmental problems are indissociable from capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism and imperialism. Sensitive to the complex intersections of power relations, I consider it important to tackle social and environmental problems together. That being said, my relation to "eco-reproductive" concerns has evolved (and continues to evolve) throughout the research process. I initially felt close to the preoccupations of my interlocutors, understanding their fear of climate change. I saw in their experiences additional proof of climate emergency. While this proximity still colours my relationship with them, I have also been confronted with ideas that made me profoundly uncomfortable. For instance, I once heard that global population was *the* problem and that the solution depended upon the education of women living in countries which have not finished their demographic transition. Hence, on multiple levels, the political significance of the issues addressed in this research has complicated the boundaries between my activism and my research activity.

[61] Cassegård and Thörn, 2018.

[62] Chateauraynaud and Debaz, 2019, 127.

[63] Allard et al., 2019, 1.

[64] *Ibid*.

Eco-Malthusianism, consumption, and responsibility

The N number of humans is the problem

This section aims to discuss my interlocutors' mobilisation of eco-Malthusian arguments, their views on consumption and what it tells us about their political ideas and attribution of responsibility. In an attempt to offer a compelling account and to prevent any homogenization, I will identify the common ground of their narratives while paying attention to the differences. In Switzerland, "population" is not a topic that receives great attention in environmental movements, contrarily to the situation described by Sasser in the United States, where young activists attend workshops about population-environment linkages. Nevertheless, some of my interlocutors clearly expressed what would most closely correspond to eco-Malthusian beliefs as they identified a causal relationship between overpopulation and environmental degradation. Among them, Noé's (32, delivery person, animal rights activist)[65] narrative is iconic. In his view, the nodal problem of our ecological troubles is human numbers:

> […] there was a moment when the question of "why are we in this situation" came up, and in fact there was one thing that was obvious: the number of people on Earth. Afterwards, there are stories of consumption and distribution of wealth, but generally speaking, it's "the more people there are, the more these people are going to consume" […] especially with the… with the evolution of the standard of living that is spreading everywhere […][66] (5th February 2021)

According to Noé, even though it is possible to limit personal reliance on industrial products and to change habits, it is impossible to not impact the environment we live in. Thus, no "existence" is always better because it means no consumption. Furthermore, environmental movements' emphasis on individual consumption is not sufficient to reverse the trend before it is too late. It must come with a critical perspective on human numbers. Adrien (48, engineer, animal rights activist) similarly expressed that such movements are relying upon ineffective solutions to environmental changes when "[overpopulation] is the main factor that influences the rest." Considering the globalisation of capitalism, humans will continue to exert significant pressure on their environment, and every birth counts. Since capitalism is not ready to stop, we cannot expect people to stop consuming. It is thus more effective to curve birth rates.

Both their views recall what Sasser described as the naturalization of "overpopulation", human numbers becoming the natural cause of resources depletion.[67] This naturalisation comes with a specific set of solutions, those applied by development agencies since the Cairo conference. Indeed, Adrien explained that empowering women and giving them the choice was the only way to reduce birth rates and reach durability. Arguing that "limiting births" does not *de facto* mean "forced sterilisation of women", he however did not see any problem with the idea that climate change can be solved by managing women's bodies. Rather, the problem is society's incapacity to address the environmental impacts of children. As described by Sasser, this naturalization is often accompanied by its proponents' feeling of being isolated – in the sense that tackling demographic growth has always been neglected as a solution. I observed similar types of feelings, as Adrien and Noé complained to be alone thinking about population numbers.

Except for these two examples, most of my interlocutors underlined ethical tensions regarding the "overpopulation" argument. For instance, Thaïs (27, executive assistant at family planning) recognised that part of the problem was rooted in the number N of humans on earth. However, defining herself as "pro-choice," she felt uncomfortable with sustaining policies that would constraint (sometimes not yet acquired) reproductive rights – although she would like people to realise that population questions matter. Later, she added that influencing global population numbers in one direction or the other raises ethical dilemmas since it has real impacts on people's lives. Indeed, children are also a labour force and some families survive only

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[65] Age and activity were not updated since the interviews were conducted. Furthermore, when political engagement is not specified it means that the person was not active in a social movement or political party.

[66] Interviews were conducted in French and I translated all the interview quotes.

[67] Sasser, 2018.

thanks to them. Even though we can critically perceive that her narrative promotes a classically white and "humanitarian" vision of families in the "Global South" – as if having children could mainly be explained by economic factors – she nevertheless stated: "I can't see myself with my look of a little privileged white woman telling people 'but you have to stop having children.'" (12th March 2021) In other words, she acknowledged that there are north-south power relations nested in demographical and environmental issues. These relations made her ethical and political positioning complicated.

Finally, others explicitly mentioned arguments against "overpopulation" because they thought that environmental problems cannot be reduced to population dynamics. Even if we "fix" the "population problem," capitalism and unequivocal faith in "progress" will not disappear. Emphasising demography is perceived as "toxic" because it leads to the idea that human numbers should decrease in high fertility countries – countries that have generally contributed the least to climate change and will suffer the most from it. Recognizing the north-south responsibility gap, they refused to mobilise such imaginaries to explain how they connected procreation and environmental problems. Paying attention to power relations structuring climate change and environmental depletion, they manifest an intersectional approach to the causes and solutions. This critical perspective falls within the feminist political ecology school of thought described earlier, reactivated on multiple occasions, notably when the BirthStrike campaign got blamed for diffusing racist discourses.[68]

Direct and indirect effects of procreation

Besides the explicit actualisation or dismissal of eco-Malthusian discourses in the forms exposed above, it is important to return to my interlocutors' visions of the ecological impacts of procreation. To do so, it is useful to distinguish between the direct and indirect effects of procreation. When probed about the theoretical link they make between reproduction and the environment, some of my interlocutors replied "a baby is a polluter". Having a child will necessarily lead to an increase in one's consumption – since basic needs such as food must be met. This type of consumption represents direct effects and participates to the "carbon legacy". We can notify the eco-Malthusian influence in such conceptions since reducing child numbers is seen as reducing ecological footprint. However, contrarily to the above example of explicit eco-Malthusian arguments, the carbon footprint narrative is not directed towards "Global South" countries. Here, Marion's (33, communication officer for a local currency, Alternatiba activist) narrative is illustrative. A stay in Central America played a critical role in her reconsideration of parenthood:

> […] it's not that long ago that I made the link with the fact that there are so many people on this planet and also… I think that Mexico made me realise how much we, Europeans, Westerners, have the biggest ecological footprint and therefore we should think more about our way of life and especially about giving life and continuing to do so… and so it only reinforced this idea that I saw myself less and less with children […] (17th March 2021)

She highlighted the idea that reproduction cannot be approached without considering its impact. Although she emphasised that "we are so many people on earth", she nonetheless attributed responsibility to "Global North" countries, where consumption practices exceed their share. Overall, while "a baby pollutes" closely resembles statements such as "we are too many on earth" – and the two often come together – their mobilisation does not necessarily lead to the types of solutions envisioned by Noé and Adrien. In other words, birth control in the "Global South" is less the focus than reduced consumption in the "Global North".

At the same time, exploring how my interlocutors understand the links between procreation and consumption, direct effects are not my interlocutors' main concern. Firstly, they particularly insisted on the indirect effects of starting a family – namely, the propensity to buy a car, move to a larger home, offer nice holidays abroad etc. Secondly, although they recognised that they felt individually committed to trying their best to align their values and action, they believed that solutions to climate change were to be found in collective action rather

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[68] See Wray, 2020.

than in individual consumption practices. I will develop these two elements in the rest of this section and the following.

While green consumption can reduce one's impact, not only is it expensive but my interlocutors were especially sensitive to the fact that having children almost automatically leads to a less sustainable lifestyle. They imagined that society had very specific expectations about how to educate children and that these standards were often aligned with materialist values. They furthermore highlighted how complicated it was to get out of normative childbearing. For instance, Louis (30, mathematics teacher) ironically simulated a discussion he would have with people who would condemn his alternative lifestyle: "Don't you take your kids on vacation? Don't you do fun things with them?" (20th January 2021). In a way, the nuclear family model is perceived by my interlocutors as a nodal point of participation in a system based on work and consumption. To illustrate that view, I refer to Gaspard (22, unemployed, animal rights activist) who said:

> […] I think [the decision not to have children is intertwined with not] wanting to continue myself, to be in a situation where… well, I have a job that… to be able to afford rent, health insurance and food, and being stuck in this continuous cycle, so with that comes the idea of trying to minimise as much as possible the expenses that we have, the cost of our life and our impact on the environment. (11th December 2020)

Without denying that it is possible to raise children and limit the family's reliance on material goods, Gaspard merely insisted that it is possible *only to some extent*. To him, it is extremely difficult to extract from the system and it is important to admit it. Gaspard's view cannot be separated from his larger understanding of capitalism as a totalitarian and destructive system that he is trying to fight. Not having children is one means among others to limit his reliance on capitalist modes of production and, to some extent, opt-out of society – alongside his engagement in civil disobedience and anti-speciesism movements. This refusal of parenthood as a critique of our capitalist modes of living, generalizable to all my interlocutors, pulls them away from a strictly eco-Malthusian understanding of the connection between environmental changes and reproduction.

Who is responsible for climate mitigation?

My interlocutors' attention to the indirect effects of procreation also raises questions about responsibility attribution and the "individuals vs. collective action" debate. As highlighted by Schneider-Mayerson and Leong: "[The] application of the normative ethics of the carbon footprint to individual reproductive intentions and choices occurs within the context of a vigorous and sometimes polarizing debate, among both scholars and environmentalists, about the value of emphasizing individual actions in response to climate change."[69] All of my interlocutors had been through a critical phase during which they re-evaluated their responsibility and practices. For instance, Marie (27, urbanist), explained:

> I think that in this environmental issue, there is really a question of responsibility towards others too. Maybe if it only affected me, if I knew that my actions would only have an effect on me, it would also be very different, my attitude would be different. But to know that my inconsistencies are going to have an impact on other people and other living beings, that's hard for me to live with. (25th November 2020)

After this phase, some of them continued to be very strict about limiting their ecological impact while others re-evaluated the overall scope of the "ecology of small steps". Part of this reevaluation ensues from the recognition that individual actions are insignificant compared to the carbon footprint of multinationals. Some of my interlocutors also questioned the culmination of the individualisation of ecological behaviours. Indeed, Emile[70] (21, history student) explicitly rejected solutions based on individual action because it articulates an individualistic and elitist logic, far from resisting the systematic and capitalist origins of environmental destruction. Furthermore, not only should we hold firms responsible, but the general context we live in highly impedes the scope of individual action. For instance, Antoine (25, urbanist, XR activist) acknowledged: "[…] it's tricky because just by living in Switzerland you're responsible for a lot of things without necessarily

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[69] Schneider-Mayerson and Leong, 2020, 1013.
[70] Emile is a non-binary person and uses the pronoun they/them.

wanting to […] but I mean, beyond certain things I can't really go any further." (22ⁿᵈ February 2021) Nonetheless, it did not prevent some of my interlocutors to feel a tension between the rational knowledge that individual actions would not solve climate change and the emotional attribution of responsibility to people who do not care. For instance, Thomas (31, assistant physician, Grève pour l'Avenir activist) mentioned:

> Sometimes there's stuff like that… a little bit of anger towards other people who don't watch out… while I'm anxious about it and I'm trying to be careful… Even though I know very well on an intellectual level that it's not what's going to change things, it's… it's more about the method of production and delivery and generalised consumption that we have to change. (19ᵗʰ March 2021)

While their posture about individual consumption practices were ambiguous – oscillating between the idea that it is important or trivial – they all shared a desire to align their environmental values with their lifestyles. They nourished this desire less because such alignment participates in climate mitigation than because it made their lives meaningful. They did not see it as an obligation arising from a feeling of responsibility but as an opportunity to overcome the numbing feeling resulting from environmental crises, and to resist the system. Indeed, while I focused here on my interlocutors' views about the ecological impact of procreation and consumption, their attempts to align values and action expanded largely beyond the sphere of daily consumption. Some refused to go to university to devote themselves to the environmental struggle, others worked only part-time to avoid stressful lifestyles that inevitably rely more on industrial products.

Certainly, their reproductive plans have entered the ways in which they were trying to align their values and action. As observed by Schneider-Mayerson, reproductive behaviors now belong "to the range of ways in which individuals conceive of themselves as and act as environmental political actors."[71] In his work, the author emphasised that what was important to his study participants were not individual environmental choices *in themselves* but the way that those choices might influence environmental politics. Similarly, my interviewees hoped to take the right direction in fostering the expansion of ecological values. Finally, my interlocutors' various conceptions of responsibility did not prevent them to see environmental crises as a systemic problem and to believe that *real* solutions to climate change would emerge from collective action. Adopting a political ecology perspective, they were aware of the power relations that structure the "Anthropocene". This is why most of them were at some point active in social movements, collectives, associations, political parties. Therefore, if procreation has entered the ways my interlocutors navigate their implication in the system, they did not see it as a direct lever of climate change mitigation.

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE: CATASTROPHE AND OPENINGS

When the future is dark

Since the foundational report of Meadows et al., *Limits to Growth*, "collapse" has been portrayed as the possible consequence of the overshooting of the Earth's capacity to provide resources and absorb human emissions.[72] Not considered inevitable, "catastrophe" depended upon humanity's capacity to curve the course of action *before it is too late*. Hence, "catastrophe" became the one side of a binary vision of the future, the other side being the ecological transition that would prevent the worst to happen.[73] In this section, I will develop my interlocutors' visions of the future. I have been told several times that the people I study are interesting for social science research because they have clear and fixed visions of the future: They know that it will be bad. On the contrary, I will show that this perspective has to be nuanced.

In this regard, Gaspard's (22, unemployed, animal rights activist) words still resonate: "I have absolutely no idea what the rest of my life will look like." (11ᵗʰ December 2020). Very often, the unpredictability of the

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[71] Schneider-Mayerson, 2022, 13.
[72] Meadows et al., 1972.
[73] Semal, 2017.

future appeared when my interlocutors reflected upon the (im)possibility to raise a child in today's world. For instance, Val (28, unemployed, green party member) expressed: "[…] I think that having a… well, throwing a child into this environment that is impossible to project, well yeah, no, it's not reasonable!" (19th November 2020). Also worried for future children, Antoine (25, urbanist, XR activist) asked: "if I cannot project myself into a bright future, how can I project a bright future for a child who would be about 25 in 2050?" (22nd February 2021). Giving more details than Val, he specified that the European climate will be "hardcore" and millions of climate refugees will be blocked to closed borders. Similarly, Julie (23, educational assistant, animal rights activist) told me more about the kind of future that she envisioned:

> […] bringing a child into the world in a place where there's no longer… where nature has really been destroyed, [where] there's no longer this unspoiled beauty, [and where] in fact our worries deal with how we're going to breathe, how we're going to drink water when… well, the water is not even clean, it's not that it's difficult to access it, it's that the water will be intoxicated or radioactive, I don't know! […] and there will be no way out. […] So I think it's unfair to impose this on an individual who hasn't chosen it. (17th November 2020)

These negative depictions of the future are highly inspired by the imaginaries and predictions convened by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports, from drought to floods, hunger to south-north migration. Does this mean that they are "catastrophists"? In their typology, Chateauraynaud and Debaz distinguish four regimes of enunciation: "*collapsologie*", technological progress, regulation and counter-Anthropocene.[74] Corresponding to the movements gathered under the "*collapsologie*" banner, actors in the first regime await that the world as we know it will disappear in the mid or long term because of anthropo-capitalo-genic environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss and the slow dismantlement of social, political and economic institutions. The second (and opposite) regime corresponds to the well-established "technology will save us". Here, enunciators do not deny crises but they believe that technoscientific progress will provide the solutions to overcome them. Instead of locating the solution in technological developments, the third regime argues that adaptation to changing environmental conditions will operate through a redesigning of governance and regulation. Finally, the last regime is the "counter-Anthropocene" and represents the perspective from which the three previous regimes are often analysed in social sciences. Moving and plural, this regime can be simultaneously catastrophist and offer alternative governance models. It gathers enunciators that maintain the future open to multiple redefinitions; on a ZAD, a transition town, a social movement. Thus, trying to offer alternatives to capitalism, possible futures emerge from local experiences.

Following Chateauraynaud and Debaz, it seems that we need to return to the question of "irreversibility" to situate my interlocutors. For most of them, environmental changes are irreversible as they are already occurring. Activating a postapocalyptic vision in the sense of Cassegård and Thörn, Odile (32, artistic collaborator, local MP Solidarité & Écologie) expressed that "collapse is already here". Therefore, she decided to invest most of her energy to fight social inequalities to minimise suffering in the chaos, rather than fighting against climate change.

My interlocutors' accounts show that irreversibility results from the lack of appropriate measures adopted by governments. After three years of intense social mobilization in Switzerland, they observed that nothing has changed. As an illustration, Thaïs (27, executive assistant at family planning) pointed at inappropriate political measures, considering that taxing cars will not save humanity. She also discredited the technological path:

> […] the common denominator is climate change, which creates environmental disturbances that we will soon no longer be able to control, and in fact it is also a little bit stupid to believe that we will be able to control them… the people who are like "yes, but technology will save humanity," I am like… to a certain extent, I think that it can improve our quality of life for a while, but we shouldn't bet everything on it because the development of new technologies has a huge environmental impact […] (12th March 2021)

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[74] Chateauraynaud and Debaz, 2019.

By arguing that the world we know now will disappear and that neither technology nor regulation will save us, they correspond to the "*collapsologie*" regime of enunciation. Despite a clear orientation to "dark futures", what is nevertheless striking is their propensity to offer vague descriptions. What exactly would prevent them from having children was seldom detailed throughout the interviews, except few isolated elements typical of scientific projections. In a way, my interlocutors' invocation of uninhabitable futures echoes Semal's observation. "Catastrophe" is a black box that actors do not have to detail because it is powerful enough.[75] At the same time, it demonstrates the general climate of uncertainty. While they certainly believe that infinite growth is impossible in a world of finite resources, my interlocutors hardly relate to "collapse" in itself. For instance, Emile (21, history student) recounted:

> "I can't get my head around the impact it's going to have on my life either […] the times I think about it a lot, it's like total anxiety (*laughs a little nervously*) […] but not knowing when it's going to happen exactly, not knowing exactly how because, there are still a lot of unknowns." (17th March 2021)

In a way, my interlocutors perceive "collapse" as something distant that has not materially concretised in their lives yet. They cannot imagine the impact it will have on their existence. Nevertheless, larger events and undergoing developments in the "Global South" make it difficult to picture oneself in the future, which also has consequences on the way they think about reproduction. Recalling Dow's research on the close imbrication of environmental and reproductive futures, my interlocutors see the future as the addition of past and present actions.[76] For Dow's interlocutors, "what gets left behind for future generations" has been endangered by past actions and largely depends on present transformative actions. Therefore, her interlocutors' fears "are not so much about the end of the world as about what might be lost if one path is taken and not another."[77] In contrast, my interlocutors expressed that a sufficient turnover may not happen on time.

Hence, more than believing that instantaneous catastrophe will actually occur, they point at current political institutions' failure to prevent climate change and foster social change. Indeed, to varying degrees, my interlocutors' understanding of environmental crises is holistic and systemic as they correlate environmental problems, patriarchy, imperialism and white supremacy to capitalism. Since both the past and the present are marked by frenetic growth and accumulation at the expense of the natural world and various categories of humans – and because these power relations intersect in complex ways – it is difficult to envision a future respectful of all living entities at a global scale. At the same time, according to Semal, the movements suggesting that "collapse" will not be totally prevented represent the third way.[78] Simply put, they open up the uncomfortable zone between the caricature of immediate collapse and the controllable transition, a zone characterised by a high degree of uncertainty. Accordingly, my interlocutors do not exactly fit Chateauraynaud and Debaz's "*collapsologie*" regime of enunciation, but also open up the future to different kinds of possibilities and imaginaries.

Uncertainty and alternative imaginaries

Following Dousset, uncertainty opens a space for the renegotiation of social rules and values.[79] He starts from the observation that, if the notion of risk generates a vision of a comprehensive and manageable future, uncertainty is much more the rule than the exception. Hence, certainty is a mere illusion of control and is built by social institutions. Accordingly, uncertainty results from a failure of the institutions that usually maintain this illusion through various systems of representations and symbols. Nevertheless, immersion in total uncertainty is highly uncomfortable and people generally tend to re-establish what Dousset has called

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[75] Semal, 2017, §10.
[76] Dow, 2016a, 2016b.
[77] Dow, 2016b, 659.
[78] Semal, 2019.
[79] Dousset, 2018.

"anticipatory capacity".[80] They do so by filling in the gap between their lived experience and social representations. Therefore, the re-establishment of anticipation operates through auto-theorisation and the re-building of a system of representation. Interestingly, since uncertainty is hard to identify, Dousset suggests that anthropologists instead capture these moments of auto-theorisation and re-building.

In a context where institutions do not provide a reliable representation of the future, my interlocutors were engaged in such processes of anticipation in multiple ways. First, they are building their own explanations of why we are in this critical situation – not in the sense that they propose a new origin of our ecocidal system but because they are actively looking for information and theorization. Recomposing their visions with multiple imaginaries, at the crossroad of various hegemonic discourses, they are engaged on a groping path. On different levels, they are challenging dominant explanations about the functioning of the world they live in.

On this path, their emphasis on uninhabitable futures is a way to fix one view of the future, to reestablish anticipation – even though it is an anticipation of bad events. Paradoxically, accepting that the future may be the place of multiple and repeated crises allows them to make decisions about their reproductive present. For instance, Val (28, unemployed, green party member) presented her decision not to have children as something that helps her to cope with uncertainty:

> I don't want the world to go to hell, but basically, I also tell myself […], I won't have to manage a world that goes to hell and [have to] raise a kid in it […] So I'm going to fight for the world, to change things on our scale, etc., but […] in fact it calms me down to say that […], at this level, I have to take care of myself, and of the people around me, but that I won't have to manage children. (19th November 2020)

Emile (21, history student) also explained that challenging normative reproductive roles is a way to properly anticipate the future by escaping denial. Afraid of being caught in a system of thought projecting that the young generations will have the same life as their parents, Emile is currently looking for ways to anticipate changes. One of their methods is to create strong social bonds, notably with people who may forgo the traditional nuclear family, considered an individualist model that is not resilient enough. Dismissing biological kin for good is perceived as a way to escape an illusionary continuity and to recreate different ways of living – despite the bitter taste of living on a damaged planet. Expressing that the best way to prepare for the future is to reinvent a new paradigm, Emile presented imagination as a coping strategy capable of restoring anticipation.

Accordingly, my interlocutors are engaged in a reevaluation of social norms and desirable futures. Firstly, they challenged the centrality of procreation in our social order and reconsidered that it should not be prescribed. They defended that childfree people, and women particularly, should not be discriminated against. Outside of the nuclear family script, they valued non-biological kin-making with their pets and friends.[81] While forgoing parenthood is culturally presented as a pessimistic disengagement from life, for my interlocutors, it is instead the opportunity to properly escape the gendered division of labor induced by the nuclear family. Secondly, when I asked them whether they would want to have children if they lived in a different context, they answered they maybe would in a less individualist, consumerist and work-based context. Indeed, going back to the question of the irreversibility of environmental changes, scales matter when my interlocutors imagine the future. They could imagine solutions at the community level and hoped to establish locally based degrowth alternatives. Some of them were building animal shelters, working as durable urbanists or dreaming to move into a community of "neorurals". In this regard, they activated "counter-Anthropocene" regimes of enunciation in the sense of Chateauraynaud and Debaz.[82]

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[80] Translated from French "capacité anticipatoire".
[81] On multi-specific kin-making, see Haraway, 2016.
[82] Chateauraynaud and Debaz, 2019.

CONCLUSION

"Eco-reproductive" concerns emerge at the intersection of multiple discourses, all constitutive of environmental movements. In this paper, I have shown that my interlocutors do not belong to one specific branch of ecology, nor do they have an homogeneous vision of how to connect reproduction and environmental crises. Nonetheless, I have focused on two registers to better understand my interlocutors' views. On the one hand, recurring sentences such as "we are too many on Earth" or "a baby pollutes" mark how my interlocutors thought about reproduction amid environmental crises. While it demonstrates a naturalization of population discourses, the solutions envisioned by most of my interlocutors were not eco-Malthusian as such. Indeed, they did not see reproduction as a lever to mitigate environmental depletion. Rather, they perceived the dominant reproductive model – nuclear family – as individualist, consumerist, and not resilient enough. Hence, my interlocutors were afraid to have children and to participate in the reproduction of an unsustainable system. While they thought that systemic power relations were responsible for environmental crises and, thus, preconised collective action rather than green consumption, they were also willing to adopt ecological and consumption practices. To correlate their values and action, the indirect effects of having children mattered to them. The ways in which they saw procreation and family as markers of their implication in a harmful system and contributing to environmental crises have certainly influenced their understandings of reproduction.

On the other hand, my interlocutors depicted dark futures when they thought about reproduction. I have heard that "collapse" is already here, as well as other arguments that highlighted explicit connection to "*collapsologie*". Pointing at inappropriate political measures to mitigate climate change and the persistence of exploitative capitalism, my interlocutors struggled to imagine that a sufficient turnover may happen on time. At the same time, following recent research on "catastrophism", the idea that we may not fully prevent "collapse" does not necessarily exclude envisioning of the future. Despite their difficulty to project themselves into what is coming next, my interlocutors scaled the irreversibility of environmental crises. Indeed, belonging to the "counter-Anthropocene" regime of enunciation, they could imagine local alternatives. In the vacuum created by uncertainty, they were redefining the values, kin, and lifestyles they wanted to nourish. Furthermore, I have showed that reconsidering parenthood is precisely what allows some of my interlocutors to re-establish anticipation. Rather than a mere disengagement from life, renouncing to biological children opens radically different futures and the possibility to care for non-biological kin amid environmental crises.

To conclude, the people I met and interviewed during my study were neither eco-Malthusian ecologists nor did they believe in a one-way trip into doom. In the face of rapid environmental changes, we need to explore the relocation of distant climate change within intimate life choices. To do so, it is crucial to break down the transition vs. collapse binary and capture the multiple imaginaries that inform people's action. Indeed, further anthropological research is required to understand how environmental uncertainty affects the way people envision their lives, their futures, and potential offspring as well as the way it pushes people to recalibrate their present realities.

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Mathilde Krähenbühl completed her master's in Anthropology and Sociology at the Geneva Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) in 2021, after obtaining a Bachelor's degree in International Relations at the University of Geneva (UNIGE). Her master's dissertation "'Environmental Childlessness?': Reproduction and (Im)possible Futures amidst Environmental Crises" looked at the environmental reasons underlying voluntary childlessness. She is now pursuing her research on the relationship between environmental concerns and parenthood among different groups of ecologists as a PhD candidate in anthropology, at the University of Lausanne.

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