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Environmental Childlessness?

Reproduction and (Im)possible Futures amidst

Environmental Crises

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Electronic reference
KRÄHENBÜHL, Mathilde. *'Environmental Childlessness?': Reproduction and (Im)possible Futures amidst Environmental Crises.* New edition [online]. Genève: Graduate Institute Publications, 2022 (generated 12 avril 2022). Available on the Internet: <http://books.openedition.org/iheid/8842>. ISBN: 9782940600397. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/books.iheid.8842.

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This text was automatically generated on 7 March 2022.

ABSTRACTS

Although voluntary childlessness based on environmental concerns is increasingly in evidence, the relationship between environmental crises and reproductive intentions has not yet significantly entered academic debate. Nonetheless, it articulates concrete ways in which the perception of environmental crises (re)shapes people's lives in western societies. In an attempt to explore human reproduction as a site of environmental interrogations, this research asks how environmental degradation is (re)shaping reproductive intentions and what the pathway is towards 'environmental childlessness'. Mobilising different scholarship and ethnographic interviews, I propose that the pathway towards 'environmental childlessness' is informed by profound uncertainties about the future, ethical interrogations, and persistent pronatalism. More than an over-simplifying update of neo-Malthusian and apocalyptic thinking, interrogations of parenthood express a broader rejection of current capitalist ways of living. Furthermore, rather than signalling a pessimistic disengagement from the future, 'environmental childlessness' appears to be a bid to attain a 'meaningful' life.

MATHILDE KRÄHENBÜHL

Mathilde Krähenbühl completed her master's in Anthropology and Sociology at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID), after obtaining a Bachelor's degree in International Relations at the University of Geneva (UNIGE). In, 2021, her master's dissertation "'Environmental Childlessness?': Reproduction and (Im)possible Futures amidst Environmental Crises" was awarded the Prize of the department of Anthropology and Sociology. She is now pursuing her research on the relationship between environmental concerns and parenthood as a PhD candidate at the University of Lausanne.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

1   First and foremost, I would like to profoundly thank the people who agreed to share their experiences, fears, and hopes with me. Talking about environmental degradation and future potentialities may be particularly challenging, but you generously offered your time and made this project possible. I have tried my best to account for your experiences and complex world views. However, to adequately portray your stories would require a dissertation for each. Thus, I hope this work can act as just a first step towards future exchanges in spaces that allow for complexity to emerge and be attentively heard.

2   Secondly, I would like to express gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Professor Shaila Seshia Galvin, for her reliable support and resources. Through your teaching of environmental anthropology, my approach to 'environmental childlessness' has been enriched and my interest in the discipline has grown. Your offer to host informal meetings amidst a period of social isolation was also precious.

3   I also want to thank my second reader, Professor Yvan Droz, for his challenging comments. Knowledge probably emerges from confrontation with alternative explanations. Alongside other professors at the Graduate Institute, you pushed me to constantly reassess the importance of my research topic.

4   Finally, this research would be of lesser quality without the help of my dear classmates and friends, both inside and outside the Graduate Institute. Ongoing exchanges over months were crucial in shaping and enriching my understanding of my interlocutors' views and the wider context in which they have evolved. Indeed, most of our discussions constituted primary food for thought as we may all, to varying degrees, engage with the question of reproduction in today's (and beyond) worlds.

1. Introduction

"Mixed-up times are overflowing with both pain and joy – with vastly unjust patterns of pain and joy, with unnecessary killing of ongoingness but also with necessary resurgence. The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places. In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings."

Donna Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 2016, 1

1 "And you, do you want children in this messy world?" a friend once casually asked me. Casual but severe, our discussion oscillated between potentiality and impossibility, hope and despair, deep desire and constraints. The point of departure for this project was the personal awareness that this question is hardly solvable. Not only because whether or not to have children is a question that typically generates inarticulate answers (Overall, 2012), but because of a palpable incapacity of people to project themselves into the future. In further informal discussions, I was able to grasp how much concerns over the environment were impeding people's life plans and how

difficult it was for some people to take responsibility for a life other than their own in the future. Yes, uncertainty seems manageable for us. We will make it, or not, and that is fine. However, uncertainty makes it hard to assume responsibility for other human beings.

2   Beyond my social environment, these concerns are flourishing in news and opinion articles, radio, and TV programmes. Different public polls examining reproductive intentions have captured these emerging environmental concerns and provide illustrative figures. In 2018, Morning Consult conducted a survey for the New York Times: 33% of respondents cited climate change as a factor in deciding to have fewer children than their ideal number, and 11% cited climate change as a factor in deciding not to have children at all (Miller, 2018). Two years later, 14.3% of a sample of 18- to 44-year-old Americans cited climate change as a "major concern" for not having children (Morning Consult, 2020). In France, 24% of those surveyed by YouGov stated that climate change would "absolutely" and "most likely" influence their decision to have children (YouGov, 2019; see Lorenzo, 2019).

3   Meanwhile, the decision to remain childless remains marginal. Having children is portrayed as a decision based on desire and natural instinct, a decision somehow banal or, at least, relegated to the untouchable sphere of 'private life.' However, as paradoxical as it may seem, everyone has an opinion on the reasons why people may refuse parenthood. Indeed, what struck me throughout this research were the reactions I encountered when explaining my project. Those who take environmental crises into consideration in their life plans remain misunderstood, if not judged. Indeed, the ways we commonly approach 'environmental despair' tend to relegate environmental concerns to the realm of personal anxieties or irrational beliefs about apocalyptic futures. Therefore, this research is a response to negative stereotypes of voluntarily childless people.

1.1 Re-engaging a Polarising Topic

4   Not only does this research respond to reductive representations of people who call parenthood into question for environmental reasons, it also serves to fill in a surprising gap in the literature. When I first became interested in the interconnection between reproduction and environmental issues, I had not imagined how polarising this topic might be. Indeed, the entanglement between demography, reproductive justice, and environmental depletion is inseparable from histories of colonial violence, systemic racism, and patriarchal domination. Following Thomas Malthus' legacy, the idea that population growth fosters environmental depletion impeded environmental movements in the second half of the twentieth century. Protecting the environment became synonymous with controlling population growth, leading to coercive birth control policies primarily directed toward marginalised communities and countries in the so-called 'Global South.'

5   Because of this strong association with 'overpopulation' discourses,[1] the interconnection between reproduction and environmental degradation has become very sensitive. Nevertheless, a few isolated thinkers and initiatives have tried to articulate this connection in ways that challenge ambivalent and slippery neo-Malthusian arguments. First and foremost, I am thinking of the work of Donna Haraway, particularly in her latest book, *Staying with the Trouble,* from which I quoted

the opening lines of this dissertation. She has also co-edited a volume with Adele E. Clarke (2018) which regroups the works of feminist science and technology scholars and specifically addresses the 'population question'. Observing that the feminist left and critical voices had almost capitulated in the face of the horror of misogyny, eugenics, and racism, they asked:

> "Why haven't the issues of warped distributions of resources and densities of human beings in conditions of structural injustice and forced displacement been systematically examined by more feminists as fundamental, including the question of increasing numbers of people?" (Clarke, 2018, 9)

6 Their urgent call to re-engage with the idea that human numbers have consequences on the planet and play a role in the futures we can imagine is not blind to the atrocities caused by population control policies. Quite the contrary, they insist on the impossibility of approaching mass extinctions without *simultaneously* legitimising having children among groups that have been historically prevented from doing so. They firmly stand against the "dehumanized 'thingness' of population" (Ibid, 14) to approach the multiple and conflicting meanings associated with 'population'. The key to their innovative perspective is that we can emphasise different ways of *making kin* across species, cultures, and nation-states to decentralise biological kinship, which is overly predominant in our system. That they imagine alternatives to biological children does not transform them into 'anti-natalist' figures. Instead, they denounce the paradox that we do not live in a pro-child world even if it is deeply pronatalist.

7 Alongside Haraway and her colleagues, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson and Kit Ling Leong (2020) have paved the way for the further academic development of this topic, a task I have embraced with enthusiasm. Noticing that people consider the future well-being of children more than overpopulation in their reproductive intentions, they have opened up new ways to think through the connection between reproduction and environmental degradation. Following this renewed interest, I ask the following research questions: How do environmental concerns (re)shape reproductive intentions? What is the space allocated to environmental motives in people's decision not to procreate, and what are the possible forms of environmental motives? And, finally, what is the pathway towards 'environmental childlessness'?

8 This research inscribes itself within a desire to re-complexify the ways in which people connect reproductive intentions and environmental crises. We need such complexity in a context where environmental concerns continue to be downplayed in western societies. 'Uncertainty' and 'crisis' are socially, culturally, and historically constructed notions and categories. Nonetheless, it is important not to undermine the 'realness' of global environmental changes - without falling into the trap of 'scientific determinism' - and to find ways to illustrate their impacts on human ways of living. Unfortunately, even though we can multiply the examples that underscore these changes and their impacts, there is a persistent tendency to refer to climate change as a 'crisis in the making'. In other words, we still need to demonstrate that 'it is happening now', and looking at 'environmental childlessness' is one way to do so.

1.2 Voluntary Childlessness, Environmental Crisis, and Ethics

9   Considering the scarcity of scholarship on 'environmental childlessness', I decided to combine very different research fields. Each of these fields suffers from certain lacunae, and I have looked for complementary explanations to merge them together. On the one hand, literature on childless/childfree people has neglected the environmental driver for voluntary childlessness. On the other hand, environmental studies have not addressed the impact of environmental depletion on reproduction in western societies. Finally, the anthropology of ethics appears as a scholarship that offers the opportunity to articulate interesting bonds with the two primary fields.

10 Firstly, this project contributes to the body of research on childless/childfree experiences. Following the increasing interest in human reproduction, neglected for decades as a valid category of social analysis, this scholarship results from the observation that "certain reproductive topics continue to be overprivileged at the expense of others" (van Balen and Inhorn, 2001, 4). Emerging from family studies in the 1980s, childless/childfree experiences became an area of interest for disciplines as varied as sociology, demography, psychology, and medicine, among others. Anthropology is surprisingly absent, except the work of Shelly Volsche (2019), whose approach and narrative, it should be noted, highly resemble scholarship outside of anthropology that retained my attention. Since Jean E. Veevers (1973) stated that "voluntary childlessness constituted a neglected area of research", scholarship has developed to unveil the sociological characteristics of this growing population (e.g. Heaton, Jacobson, and Fu 1992; Fiori, Rinesi, and Graham, 2017), to understand the motives of childfree people (Park, 2005), the consequences of childlessness (e.g. Mcquillan et al., 2012; Somers 1993; McMullin and Marshall 1996), and people's experiences of stigma and resistance (e.g. Park, 2002; Matthews and Desjardins, 2016; Morison et al., 2016; Debest, 2014).

11 Although we are generally witnessing an increasing interest in voluntary childlessness (Shapiro, 2014), the understanding of the environmental reasons behind childlessness is limited. While scholars generally agree that the expansion of women's opportunities and the reconfiguration of the family have transformed the contexts in which adults navigate fertility decisions, the potential role played by environmental crises has been almost a non-issue. I could only identify a few references to population growth concerns regarding the motivations of childfree people (see Houseknecht 1987; Park, 2005). Moreover, while childlessness has been generally conceptualised as a relevant case to investigate the modern family in and of itself, I suggest looking at it as a vector of ecological interrogations and (im)possible futures. At the same time, even though the literature has neglected the environmental dimension, 'environmental childlessness' cannot be detached from broader dynamics shaping the relatively recent appeal of childfree modes of living. Therefore, I primarily draw from scholars interested in the experiences of the voluntarily childless community, how social pressure is exerted, and the answers deployed by the people concerned.

12 Secondly, different examples of research that touch upon the ways societies negotiate environmental changes – perhaps best designated by the term 'environmental studies' – also inform this project. Environmental social movements have mainly interested sociologists and I draw on some of their work to contextualise the emergence of

environmental values and concerns in Euro-American societies (e.g. Inglehart 1977; 1990; Cotgrove 1982). Less interested in environmental social movements, anthropologists have looked at how environmental changes transform local ways of living. Indeed, while climate change is a concrete manifestation of the 'global', it creates highly local experiences. Anthropology, it is argued, "appear[s] to be making strides at relating global warming models to everyday lives" (Brown 1999, 1141). Observations about how climate change already alters symbolic and subsistence cultures have mostly been conducted with indigenous communities (e.g. Crate, 2008), with a significant interest in the ways various communities adapt to rapidly changing environments.

13 This interest in 'adaptation' has allowed anthropologists to demonstrate that reactions to climate change cannot be approached as a kind of technical adjustment as they involve the need to frame responses that accord with social and cultural parameters (Oliver-Smith, 2017, 209). Arguing that communities do not only react to change but also anticipate the future, Kirsten Hastrup (2018) similarly demonstrates that anticipation does not occur outside ethical concerns. Even though 'adaptation' encompasses elements of 'anticipation', I prefer the latter to approach 'environmental childlessness.' Indeed, it captures the orientation towards possible futures and leaves empty space for 'uncertainty' and 'imagination' as analytical concepts more than 'adaptation', understood as a response to past events.

14 Nevertheless, indigenous communities are not the only ones where adaptation is observable – although they experience climate changes dramatically. As noted by Shirley Fiske and her colleagues (2015, 21), "[t]hose affected [by climate change] include both place-based communities who have a direct and daily interaction with their environment, as well as wider communities of faith who recognize that climate changes have altered their ways of orienting to the world." Part of this reorientation is driven by the great role played by environmental hazards in transforming modern societies into "risk societies" (see Beck, 2000; Giddens, 2009). Environmental risks challenge the optimistic assumption that the future is manageable and "[i]ncreased consciousness of it, today, haunts us more than any sense of ends to come" (Buell, 2010, 30). Whereas environmental studies underscore the tangibility of climate change, reproduction remains surprisingly absent, as it if was not affected by these dramatic changes. On the contrary, I draw from the notions of 'risk', 'uncertainty', and 'anticipation', to discuss 'environmental childlessness' as a way of 'anticipating dark futures' and shedding light on what generates my interlocutors' sense of insecurity.

15 Finally, struck by the ethical takes of my interlocutors, explicit in the interviews, I propose to look at the anthropology of ethics and morality. The most debated issue in this field is where anthropologists should look for ethics and what constitutes morality (Mattingly and Throop, 2018). Put in an over-simplifying way, a few scholars locate ethics in the ordinary (e.g. Lambek, 2010; Das, 2015; 2012), while others maintain that ethics are a space of conscious negotiation of sometimes opposed sets of moral values, a singular moment of extraction and reflection (e.g. Robbins, 2004; 2007; Laidlaw, 2002; 2014; Zigon, 2007).

16 The 'ordinary ethics' posture developed in response to a common disregard for the residual category of the 'everyday', as well as in opposition to the view that posits ethics as values that only serve as guiding principles for behaving ethically. According to Michael Lambek (2010, 1), "given our consciousness, our socialization and sociality,

and our use of language, we are fundamentally ethical." Therefore, ethics are intrinsic to human action. Veena Das shares this view and goes so far as to argue that habit is the site where anthropologists can trace the working of ordinary ethics. Through her ethnographic work in low-income neighbourhoods in Delhi, she demonstrates the relevance of a shift "from ethics as made up of judgments we arrive at when we stand away from our ordinary practices to that of thinking of the ethical as a dimension of everyday life in which we are not aspiring to escape the ordinary but rather to descend into it as a way of becoming moral subjects" (Das, 2012, 134).

17 This view contrasts with that of Jarrett Zigon (2007). To be able to observe ethics, a task that has become impossible since Durkheim (see 1953, 35–62) conflated the moral and the social, he argues, anthropologists should turn their attention towards what he calls "moral breakdowns". Building his argument on the work of Martin Heidegger (1996), these ethical dilemmas that emerge in particular situations or life events extract the individual from the unreflective way of 'being-in-the-world'. However, this does not mean that the individual was not moral before. On the contrary, most people consider themselves and others as moral most of the time. However, the 'ethical moment' is a moment of consciousness, a reflexive moment of creativity during which the individual navigates the usually implicit system of values inscribed in their worldview. While the return to the comfortable way of being-in-the world is the primary goal of ethics, Zigon (2007, 138) nonetheless insists that this return does not bring the individual back to the same moral predicaments. Instead, the ethical moment pushes people to "work on themselves" and often alter the ways they relate to the world (Ibid). Therefore, the incentive to respond to ethical demands, weighing upon us from time to time, is not to be found in a motivation 'to be good' but to get out of the breakdown (Ibid, 139).

18 Nonetheless, these two different understandings of what constitutes morality and ethics are not as polarised as they sometimes appear. For instance, Throop and Zigon (2014, 3) suggest that their contribution is in their careful analysis of the everydayness of moral experiences. Hence it appears that Zigon might not be necessarily opposed to the notion of the 'everyday' but rather to Lambek's view according to which ethical judgement is intrinsic to social activity because there are always criteria already in place (Ibid, 2). Recognising that "there are always criteria" portrays ethics as the capacity to balance social normativity by evaluating existing rules and elides that some moral experiences cannot be understood as normative social behaviour (Ibid). On the other hand, Das (2012, 42) notes that her "descent into the ordinary" does not mean that individuals cannot critique their culture or improve their conditions of life. Instead, it merely means that they would not do so by falling back on transcendental values but rather cultivating everyday sensibilities (Ibid).

19 As much as it is tempting to understand "moral breakdowns" in opposition to the daily enactment of ethics because they recall the idea that ethics are 'out there', this research instead follows the efforts of anthropologists who have merged the 'ordinary' and the 'extraordinary' (e.g. Mattingly, 2014). Furthermore, as I read through the literature, it became clear that the somehow recent interest in the 'good' life shed an interesting light on 'environmental childlessness.' The exploration of how people thrive on living a 'meaningful' life even in dire circumstances falls within the move from "dark anthropology" to "the anthropology of the good" (see Ortner, 2016). Joel Robbins (2013) highlighted the necessity to take distance from the "suffering object," which had become the primary object of anthropological attention since the early

1990s. Following Robbins, I believe that it is worth turning our attention towards "the way people orientate to and act in a world that outstrips the one most concretely present to them" as a way to "explore the different ways people organize their personal and collective lives in order to foster what they think of as good" (Ibid, 457).

20 Apparently evolving separately, these three research fields are interconnected. Even though the impacts of the perception of environmental crises on procreation have been neglected, demographic research has been conducted on the links between uncertainty and fertility (e.g. Trinitapoli and Yeatman, 2018; Johnson-Hanks, 2005). Notwithstanding that 'uncertainty' in these works refers to economic instability, research has shown that procreation increases or decreases in different contexts of uncertainty. While the malleable nature of fertility preferences is widely accepted, the ways in which uncertainty affects reproduction are unclear and multiple. Looking at the sharp decline in Russia in the 1990s, Elizabeth Brainerd (2007) observed that, although measures of instability and procreation show little correlation, women with positive expectations about the future were less likely to abort than women with negative expectations. Differently, studying rural Nepal, John Sandberg (2006) demonstrated that women's fertility increased when child survival is uncertain. Overall, Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (e.g. 2002; 2011) built a consistent critique of theories that reduce fertility to planned action and assume clarity and predictability about the future instead of considering the messiness of human life. Looking at Cameroon, she described how flexibility in reproductive preferences alleviates the general sense of crisis, allowing people to adapt more easily to uncertain life events. Even though my research does not address demographic levels of analysis, this emphasis on uncertainty underscores the assertion that various contexts affect people's reproductive intentions.

21 Central to how these three fields of research overlap is the idea that uncertainty and risks open up spaces for ethical negotiation. As noted by Beck (2007, 5): "The category of risk opens up a world within and beyond the clear distinction between knowledge and non-knowing, truth and falsehood, good and evil." Furthermore, looking at "outstripping worlds" (Robbins, 2013, 457) means looking at the liminal and uncertain space between hope and doubt, highly characteristic of contemporary entanglements between crises and the everyday. As described by Das (2015, 376), "pictures of planetary extinctions seep into our consciousness making the everyday appear as bristling with dangers rather than as a place of security and comfort." In other words, environmental crises now penetrate people's lives, forcing them to reconsider the future they imagined for themselves. Imagining the future comes hand in hand with looking for one's purpose in a life often portrayed by my interlocutors as 'meaningless'. Therefore, ethics are entangled in questions of identity as people try to make choices that make them feel as if they are 'good'.

22 Finally, Katharine Dow's (2016) ethnography most closely approaches the entanglements between procreation, environmental concerns, and ethical work. Based on fieldwork conducted in Spey Bay, a coastal village in northeast Scotland, Dow discusses how the inhabitants, who for the most part work in nature protection, articulate the connection between the ethics of assisted reproductive technologies (ART), endangered futures, and the 'good' life. One observation that runs through the book is that reproduction is entangled in people's everyday concerns and, therefore, we should not treat reproduction as separate from the rest of life. How the inhabitants of Spey Bay invested in the place to make it a 'good' place to live and their accounts about

the necessity to build a "stable environment" before having children "[indicate] the importance of reproduction – in humans and other parts of the natural world – in caring for the environment and working to prevent climate change" (Ibid, 47).

23   Interestingly, Dow's informants reverse my interlocutors' conceptions of the connection between reproduction and the environment. By "endangered futures", Dow refers to her informants' fears about human activity becoming divorced from nature through scientific overreaching (Ibid, 98). As their anxieties were ostensibly directed at the natural world – materialised in their commitment to species survival – the inhabitants of Spey Bay were worried about future human infertility caused by pollution and the pervasive use of reproductive technology. Indeed, these various elements threaten the 'naturalness' of reproduction. While my interlocutors reconsider their reproductive intentions to adopt more ecological ways of living, the impact of increasing population on the planet was not a common topic in Spey Bay. Instead, the overall quest for the 'good' life goes hand in hand with the necessity to secure a healthy environment for future children. Although Dow's work invites us to consider reproduction, environmental concerns, and ethics in relation to each other, her findings offer the opportunity to compare my interlocutors' experiences with contrasting narratives.

1.3 Mapping the Argument

24   In chapter 3, I contextualise the more or less recent appeal of childless lifestyles. While feminist movements during the second half of the twentieth century participated in normalising voluntary childlessness, pronatalist injunctions to motherhood have transformed and continue to assign gendered and binary reproductive roles within the nuclear family. In this context, scholars became interested in what propels people not to have babies. Whereas the reasons are multiple, I problematise 'childlessness' as a category that conveys notions such as 'desire' and 'choice' when these cannot be taken for granted – noticing that this is particularly salient amidst environmental uncertainty. Alongside the idea that starting a family is a rational decision that couples should mature at length, significant literature emphasises that 'voluntary childlessness' reflects the emergence of an autonomous individual looking for self-optimisation. Instead, following the work of scholars who observed a more radical rejection of motherhood, I argue that my interlocutors' childlessness reveals a broader politicisation. Even though some of them correspond to the dominant picture of 'childfree' people looking for freedom, their pathways towards childlessness also articulate a rejection of the heteronormative nuclear family, its reproduction of gendered parental roles, and its unequal distribution of the household workload.

25   The aim of chapter 4 is to relocate the environmental dimension into the complex assemblage of reasons presented in chapter 3. I start by contextualising the emergence of 'new environmentalism' and the recent entry of 'collapse' into environmental movements to present my interlocutors as vectors of particular ecological thinking. Then, I focus more specifically on the entanglements between reproduction and environmental degradation, and I go back to Malthus' legacy to explain why overpopulation discourses are polarising. I also expose that 'uncertainty' and 'inhabitable futures' progressively compete with the dominant trope of 'overpopulation', exemplifying the over-simplification sometimes deployed by the

media. Following the results of the first empirical research about people who factor climate change into their reproductive intentions (see Schneider-Mayerson and Leong, 2020), my interlocutors' accounts confirm the predominant attention given to uncertainty. Finally, I support Servigne and Stevens' denunciation of the impossibility of evoking potential collapse without being categorised under various mocking etiquettes. Rather than being neo-Malthusian or irrational survivalists, my interlocutors incorporate their anti-capitalist political beliefs and environmental anticipation into their life projects.

26 Chapter 5 supports scholarship that demonstrates that both the development of environmental values and reproduction raise ethical dilemmas. Adding layers of analysis to the two previous chapters, I argue that reproductive norms should be approached in relation to the ethical experience coalesced by environmental crises, experiences highly informed by feelings of responsibility. Building upon the 'overpopulation-uncertainty' continuum exposed in chapter 4, the attribution of responsibility either results from the CO_2 matrix according to which all our actions have an environmental impact, or it results from feelings of guilt towards future children. Following the former, childlessness is portrayed as an individualistic solution to climate change. However, for various reasons, I argue that this perspective oversimplifies my interlocutors' ethical experiences. First, most of my interlocutors did not conceptualise childlessness as a solution to climate change. Second, care for future generations of humans and non-humans infuse their feelings of responsibility – a perspective that challenges the climate ethics argument according to which the moral object that would foster climate change mitigation is absent. Finally, the profound desire to live a 'meaningful' life, where utopias and actions align, nuances the idea that my interlocutors' relationship to procreation is informed by distant moral rules that make them feel accountable. As exposed in chapter 4 about anticipation, my interlocutors embody their utopias in their life choices. This last element allows me to argue that 'environmental childlessness' is not necessarily an individualistic disengagement from life, but a re-engagement towards collective imagined futures.

27 Returning to the debate over where to look for ethics, chapter 5 also demonstrates that ethics are better understood at the interplay between the 'ordinary' and the 'extraordinary.' As described in the previous chapter, some of my interlocutors' environmental concerns emerged during singular moments of reflection, the term "prise de conscience" (growing awareness) appearing regularly. Indeed, uncertainty and the liminal space between hope and doubt are contexts within which 'ethical moments' are most likely sparked. Other snippets of experience emphasise that my interlocutors were grappling with ethical considerations daily – as much as they wished sometimes to escape them. Whereas it is tempting to approach reproductive choices as dilemmas that extract individuals from their unreflective way of being to the world, I argue that these decisions are deeply interwoven with the everyday.

28 Finally, in chapter 6, I go back to how my interlocutors dealt with pronatalist injunctions and one of the first hypotheses I framed to capture 'environmental childlessness'. As a significant part of the literature on voluntary childlessness focuses on stigma management strategies, I initially understood the environmental dimension as a way to justify a deviant pathway and perform a positive identity. However, it appeared that my interlocutors found in ecology much more than an excuse for their childlessness, and my analysis underscores the need to overcome the narrowing

framework of stigma management strategies. To start with, the environmental motive does not present a particular advantage and my interlocutors did not hide the fact that children do not necessarily move them. Furthermore, childlessness is a political tool to raise awareness of global change in some cases. Finally, their interrogations around parenthood cannot be disentangled from their larger worldviews, identities, and uncertainty. Arguing that the environmental dimension is more than an excuse was only possible at the end of this dissertation, after having developed in previous chapters how reproduction has become a site of environmental and ethical interrogations.

NOTES

1. 'Overpopulation' is a controversial term. However, I do not systematically use quotation marks to lighten the text. The same holds for other terms that I often use, such as 'uncertainty' or 'voluntary childlessness'. Furthermore, I use simple quotation marks to underline critical distance, whereas I use double quotation marks when referencing secondary literature and interviews.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data Collection

1   Considering my research object – 'environmental childlessness' – the empirical material I was interested in was individual narratives and experiences around questions ranging from parenthood to environmental consciousness. Therefore, semi-structured in-depth interviews were the most appropriate method. I also organised a collective discussion at the end of the interviewing process, at the end of March 2021. Indeed, some people expressed a desire to meet with people with whom they share concerns. Five of my interlocutors participated and exchanged their views in an informal setting. I wanted to observe whether their narratives would change from what they had previously shared with me because of the group setting. I also knew that they did not necessarily share the same views on specific issues, such as overpopulation.

2   For two main reasons, I decided not to focus on a particular community or group of activists. First, no Swiss campaign specifically addresses and advocates for 'environmental childlessness' – similar to the GINKS or BirthStrike. Second, while 'environmental childlessness' might be niched in activist circles where ecology is a primary concern, and while these environments represent good entry points, I considered them limiting. Identifying people in a situation of 'environmental childlessness' outside of these networks would provide a more robust anchoring to the research. In other words, it would break with the supposed marginality of the topic. The decision not to focus on a particular group or community explains why I did not conduct participant observation. Indeed, 'environmental childlessness' was not identified in a particular space or group.

3   I conducted 14 interviews between November 2020 and March 2021. I met my interlocutors in person, except for Marion, who lives in France. We met in parks or at Saint-Martin, a collective and self-managed space that I can access in Lausanne. All my interviewees agreed to being recorded, and the recordings lasted between 50 minutes and two hours. With a few participants, our exchanges expanded beyond the recordings. To be able to better analyse them, I transcribed the fourteen interviews. Some of my interlocutors asked to read the transcriptions and made minor modifications. Interestingly, a few women were glad to receive these transcriptions,

telling me that it represents the possibility of archiving their thoughts and remembering their position at that specific moment. After transcription, I coded the interviews using *Taguette*, an open-access software for qualitative analysis. The purpose of the coding was mainly to organise my interlocutors' narratives by themes.

4   Our discussions always started with the same question, "How did the question of having children or not emerge?" Then, the order of my questions varied depending on my interlocutor's response. Overall, the following questions were systematically covered: Have they ever wanted kids? What are the different reasons surrounding their childlessness? Since when have they been concerned by the environmental situation? How do they feel about it and what are the practices available to them to limit their feelings of responsibility or helplessness? What is the connection they make between reproduction and environmental change? Do they speak about it with family and friends? What kinds of reactions do they receive? When do they mobilise the environmental argument throughout these exchanges? And, finally, what are the perceived advantages and difficulties associated with this decision?

5   Finding people who embrace 'environmental childlessness' had been preoccupying at the beginning of this research. I mobilised different strategies, but I mostly reached people by word of mouth. My first entry point was an ecofeminist gathering held in Lausanne in July 2020. I organised a discussion about 'having children in an environmentally uncertain world'. Second, friends of mine referred me to people who felt concerned by these questions. From there, the snowball effect worked well, and most of my interlocutors introduced me to friends of theirs. In February 2021, a few people who had previously expressed interest decided not to participate and the process was blocked. I was also willing to expand my sample to larger circles. Therefore, I contacted two gynaecologists in Lausanne and asked them to spread the word about this research. Because of the public health situation, they were not allowed to distribute flyers, but they told me they would ask some of the patients they thought would be interested. However, that attempt failed and nobody contacted me. I also tried to reach BirthStrike, Swiss Climate Strike, and the Feminist Strike as these groups would be good entry points. While I got no official answers, I knew the word had spread in ecologist and feminist circles in Lausanne. For instance, Thomas spontaneously contacted me after hearing about the research from there.

2.2 Presentation of the Research Interlocutors

6   The question that interests us now is: who is concerned by 'environmental childlessness?' Overall, my selection criteria were broad in order to encompass a variety of experiences. All I asked of the participants was that they identify the fact that they are unsure about becoming biological parents as stemming mainly from environmental reasons. In other words, my interlocutors needed not to have taken a firm decision, nor to have called parenthood into question *only* based on environmental motives. Nonetheless, two of my decisions require explanations. First, I decided to discuss with people of different genders because both childlessness and environmental issues are gendered experiences (see OFS, 2020 about the gendered perception of the environment). Moreover, there is a tremendous amount more research focused only on women than studies interested in all genders.

7   Second, I decided not to restrict my sample to people in their thirties, even though it is generally argued that childless experiences become worth studying only after this age (Debest, 2014, 46). For instance, Schneider-Mayerson and Leong (2020, 4) selected 27 as the minimum age to ensure that participants were not just registering fleeting anxieties and were thinking concretely about having children. This view draws from the problematic assumption that, although it is widespread not to desire children before that age, it is subject to change as soon as women celebrate their thirtieth birthday. It is commonly known as the 'biological clock'. On the contrary, Rosemary Gillespie (2003, 125) argues that it is important to hear the stories of both younger and older women. Not doing so would re-enact the attitudes of health professionals who refuse to sterilise young women because 'they will change their minds' (Ibid). I support that view as I believe that 'fleeting anxieties' are worth capturing. Indeed, it was illusionary to expect from my interviewees that they would indeed remain childless. Having children or not is a question that is highly speculative and, therefore, whether my interlocutors' decision was fixed or materialised by means of sterilisation did not matter. I further argue that it was essential to be attentive to people in their twenties since they are significant vectors of environmental concerns. Again, as Schneider-Mayerson and Leong's (2020, 8) research reveals: younger respondents were more concerned about the climate impact their potential children would experience than older respondents.

8   Despite the open-ended criteria, my interlocutors were all white and middle-class or upper-middle-class people (except Adrien, who grew up in a low-income family), and eleven of my interlocutors had benefited from tertiary education. As I explained above, my attempts to expand my sample beyond the social circles I could access initially were unsuccessful. Consequently, my group of 'environmentally childless people' was homogeneous in terms of class and race. While I expected women's greater propensity to participate in this research, I ended up interviewing six cis men, seven cis women, and one trans non-binary person. Six were in a long-term heterosexual relationship, cohabitant or not. One person was polyamorous, and the others were not in a relationship at the time. Some of them used the word 'single', others merely said they were not in a relationship. I make this distinction because my interlocutors did not necessarily embrace the words 'couple' or 'single'. One can be in a relationship without subscribing to the heteronormative way of being a couple. So far, except regarding financial security, my interlocutors correspond to the larger picture of childfree people, characterised by less traditional and conventional gender roles, lower levels of religious observance, urban residency, greater financial stability and professional employment, and higher levels of education (see Basten, 2009).

9   Most of my interlocutors were politically engaged, notwithstanding that they were so to different degrees and that the public health situation had a general numbing effect on their activities. Nine of them were active members of an association, a collective, or a political party. Two of them seemed uncomfortable to identify themselves as 'activists' and said they "gravitated around militant circles", and two others said they were not active at all. Their different political engagements exemplify that 'environmental childlessness' resonates across a broad spectrum of affinities and is not limited to radical groups. Finally, my interlocutors maintained with different levels of certainty their conviction not to have children, and these evaluations remain highly dependent on my personal interpretation since I have not asked them to fill in any kind

of survey that would intend to quantify these levels. Five of them were sure (underwent or considered sterilisation, were older than the rest of the group or simply expressed strong commitment to voluntary childlessness). Four seemed confident, but less sure than the first five - they typically stated "I don't know what would make me change my mind". The last five experienced profound hesitation and were open to the 'possibilities of life'.[1]

10   2.3 Positionality and Reflexivity

11   As I hinted in the introduction, I feel close to the topic. I am personally affected by environmental presents and futures. I also consider myself a feminist, and I have been involved in the feminist strike and other collectives since the beginning of my Master's. I have never felt particularly moved by the idea of becoming a mother, but it remains a possibility, if the time should come. However, both environmental uncertainty and gender inequality transformed a non-question into a question. Therefore, my subjectivities shaped my willingness to study 'environmental childlessness' and how I approached it.

12   Beyond the way I engage with these questions, it is also essential to reflect on my position throughout the data collection process. As data emerge from an interactive process, the way people expressed themselves during the interviews cannot be detached from their perception of my position. During these discussions, I have been transparent, when necessary or meaningful, about my own interrogations and political engagements. Furthermore, I conducted most of the interviews in Saint-Martin, an alternative space known for its political and social activities. Without necessarily making my position explicit, my interlocutors had thus gained information about me. That space and the fact that most people had been introduced through friends probably eased the exchanges. For all these reasons, the "researcher-informant asymmetry" at play in the interviews had been minimised.

13   On the other hand, my interlocutors' perception of my pro-environmental and feminist position has probably impacted the image they wanted to project. Others often judge our reaction to environmental destruction and ecological practices and we, therefore, try to perform a positive image when discussing them. It is also a way to feel less guilty. The same is true in all social struggles, and I am tempted to call this phenomenon the 'syndrome of the good activist'. Within militant circles, there are norms about what can be said, what cannot, and the package of the 'aware and deconstructed' individual. Schneider-Mayerson and Leong (2020, 4) call it "social desirability", particularly at stake in emotionally and politically sensitive subjects. While they consider it a bias that they could only minimise using an open-ended survey, I believe that it is more productive to embrace it as it reveals significant ethical processes. Indeed, "social desirability" is close to the trade-off examined by Edward F. Fischer (2014) between stated preferences and revealed preferences, namely, the difference between what people say and what they do. Although deeds are often taken to be more authentic, less performative, Fischer (Ibid, 44) argues that "we should also take seriously what people say they want". Words reveal valid desires and long-term prosocial values. Therefore, I interpret the 'syndrome of the good activist' as an illustration of my interlocutors' values, and these should be attentively considered.

NOTES

1. See Annexes for a complete table presenting the participants.

3. Childlessness is on the Rise

1 While there is a recent tendency to account for a dramatic rise in 'childlessness', this is far from a new phenomenon. As highlighted by Michaela Kreyenfeld and Dirk Konietzka (2017a, 5), historical demography indicates that in many European regions in the 19th and early 20th centuries, about 20% of women remained childless. However, to relativise the novelty of this demographic trend does not prevent us from recognising a recent increase in childlessness and its expansion to countries that historically indicated low rates such as Italy (Ibid, 3-4). In Switzerland, alongside Germany and Austria, the childlessness rate is high (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2017b, v). In 2018, in the 50-59 age category, 30.5% of women and 27.6% of men with tertiary education were childless (OFS, 2019). While the results are 10 points below for women who completed compulsory schooling, the difference is less apparent for men. When it comes to reproductive intentions, 9.7% of women and 8.0% of men in the 20-29 age category intend to remain childless. Despite the lack of statistical evidence distinguishing between *involuntary* and *voluntary* childlessness, the literature agrees that the latter represents a "major development of the modern family" (Agrillo and Nelini, 2008, 347–48).

2 Meanwhile, world population numbers are getting ambiguous: rapid decline in particular countries coexists with the exponential increase in global numbers. On the one hand, childlessness is part of the 'demographic transition', a process which started in Europe in the middle of the eighteenth century. Resulting from mortality decline, this transition transforms the demographic landscape through centuries from societies with many children and few elderly to societies with few children and many elderly (Reher, 2013, 24). Following this model, birth rates will continue to drop, and concerns about economic growth and social security systems replace worries about 'overpopulation'. On the other hand, world population is expected to exceed 11 billion people by 2100, *only if* birth rates continue to decrease (Clarke, 2018, 1). Announcing this number always goes hand in hand with recalling that world population is estimated to have been 1.6 billion only a century ago. Here, fertility decline is welcomed to secure healthy development.

3 Beyond the scope of this research, these demographic debates nonetheless stand in the background and inform the antinomic (and often anxious) views regarding the rise in childlessness. According to Charlotte Debest, specialised in the particular case of France

where birth rates remain high compared to the rest of Europe, the phenomenon is mainly media-driven: there is no crisis of desire for children (Desprez, 2019). In this regard, the next sections discuss why voluntary childlessness generates such anxieties and what propels people to opt out of parenthood in a context where such decisions are not encouraged.

3.1 Social Change Explanations and Persistent Pronatalism

4   Following demographic transition theories,[1] social change explanations such as women's increasing professional opportunities and improved reproductive technologies are commonly mobilised to explain the rise in voluntary childlessness since the mid-twentieth century in Euro-American countries. Feminist movements are usually targeted to explain why more and more women and couples have progressively decided to have no or less children. Indeed, particularly during the 1970s, childbearing and family were pointed to by feminist movements as institutions that impede gender equality and women's emancipation (see Weeks, 2021). Nonetheless, whereas scholars initially concentrated on explaining why childlessness was on the rise, they then had to solve the paradox between the relative rarity of this lifestyle and the higher projections made in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1982, Sharon K. Houseknecht identified that the decrease in the voluntary childlessness rate observed in 1975 was paradoxical if we consider that the phenomenon is primarily correlated with women's education and employment, variables that were continuously on the rise. To solve that paradox, she drew from what Howard Becker (1960) has called "normative reactions to normlessness" to explain why the weakening of the nuclear family that occurred during the 1960s was directly followed in the mid-1970s by a strong need to reaffirm its values. In other words, researchers mobilised theories that emphasise cultural attachment to traditional motherhood and femininity to account for the only limited rise in childlessness (e.g. Ashburn-Nardo, 2017).

5   This limited rise reveals the persistence of pronatalism – understood as a meaning system that values procreation – in a western context where we tend to assume that women now 'have the choice'. As underlined by Kristin Park (2002, 22), pronatalist pressures may have been more substantial since the 1990s than they were thirty years ago. Indeed, voluntary childlessness may have benefitted from the new social movements that emerged in the 1960s, including second-wave feminism, zero population growth, and reproductive justice movements (Ibid). Operating at different levels of society (see Heitlinger, 1991), pronatalism is a driver of critical assumptions that construct normative expectations of parenthood, family, and gender roles: parenthood is seen as natural and located in human instincts and biology, it is considered as a milestone in the normal progression through heterosexual adulthood, and it is seen as personally fulfilling, essential for a happy and meaningful life (Morison et al., 2016, 185). It is not a coincidence that a significant part of the preliminary inquiry of childlessness focused on its consequences, often assuming that different levels of happiness would be observed between parents and childless people (e.g. Callan 1987; Somers 1993; McMullin and Marshall 1996).

6   Therefore, looking at alternative lifestyles such as voluntary childlessness appears as an analytical strategy to delineate the changing contours of pronatalist social norms.

For instance, Gillespie (2000) studied the emerging contradiction between cultural discourses of motherhood and femininity and the experiences of an increased number of women. She asked "to what extent and in what ways might cultural discourses of motherhood and femininity have declined or transformed as women's lives have changed" (Ibid, 223). Observing through her participants' stories that childlessness was generally met by disbelief, disregard, or seen as deviance, she argues that traditional injunctions to motherhood instead became more subtle in the ways they continued to project a pronatalist mandate through the "having it all" discourse – i.e. women should now be mothers *and* workers.

7   Studying the "procreative norm" – a concept that describes the socially determined "good conditions" to have children – Nathalie Bajos and Michèle Ferrand (2006) test the existence of the 'having it all' discourse in France. Looking at women who have had abortions, the authors analyse the factors mentioned to explain what are the best conditions to 'enter parenthood'. Charlotte Debest (2014, 33–34) summarises: parents must be neither too young nor too old (women particularly), should have finished their studies, have found a well-paid job, be in a heterosexual, cohabitant, and stable couple, and they should desire their future child. Interestingly, the authors observed that women aged between 25 and 34 minimise professional issues in their decision to abort: either they decide to have children when it was not planned and abandon their professional career, or they explain the decision to abort emphasising other factors such as relationship instability. On the contrary, women under and above that age category often mentioned professional reasons to postpone or avoid pregnancy. Not only does this reflect that 'maternal obligations' are difficult to combine with work, it also highlights how the procreative norm is intrinsically linked to a persistent sexual division of labour. Despite the 'superwomen' rhetoric, material conditions make it harder for women to undertake productive work and, therefore, they valorise reproductive work in their discourse to make sense of their situation. In other words, they tend to value motherhood and tone down its professional disadvantage rather than voice their incapacity to reconcile contradictory injunctions.

8   Pronatalist norms and injunctions are compelling because they delimit and recreate gender identities. Historically, the nuclear family – and reproduction at its core – played a crucial role in attributing particular roles to men and women. Imbricated in the larger functioning of the economy, women were assigned reproductive tasks and responsibilities within the household. Not so long ago, the primary essence and social role of women was considered to be their reproductive roles. For that reason, although pronatalism promotes images of parenthood and the family in general, women face greater pressure than men when it comes to procreation. The ongoing feminist struggle for reproductive rights – i.e. unconditional access to contraception and abortion – reflects that reproduction can hardly be disentangled from patriarchy.

9   This being said, it does not mean that all women are forced into motherhood. Reproduction is not a patriarchal mandate in and of itself. Indeed, reproduction is a complex phenomenon as it is simultaneously individual, social, biological, cultural, political, and environmental (Clarke, 2018, 26). By contrast, lack of alternative models and repeated injunctions to motherhood are manifestations of our patriarchal and pronatalist society. For instance, whereas the ambivalence about motherhood is probably easier to voice today than in the past, the increased availability of reproductive technologies likely reinforces the pressure some people feel when it

comes to having children (Letherby, 2002, 17). Furthermore, reproductive technologies play a role in reinforcing normative social norms of parenthood. Since women can decide to abort, the best circumstances have to be met more than ever (Bajos and Ferrand, 2006, 92).

3.2 Choice and Desires of Parenthood

10   The difficulty in distinguishing between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' childlessness not only limits statistical analysis but also tells us that 'childlessness' is hardly definable. It is necessarily embedded in a vast array of life experiences and combines voluntary and involuntary factors. Researchers generally differentiate people who express the intention to remain childless relatively early in life ("early articulators") from those who arrive at that decision through a series of postponements ("postponers") (Veevers 1973; Houseknecht 1987). Recognising that most women belong to the postponer case (see Mcquillan et al., 2012) blurs the boundary between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary'. Intentions do shift and the stories we tell about our lives are highly adaptive: what we may initially narrate as a desire to meet better circumstances to welcome a child can be reinterpreted later on, in the case where the awaited moment never came, as a deliberate choice and vice versa. People who are biologically unable to have children can also adopt the 'childfree' identity. For that reason, it is perhaps more appropriate to refer to a continuum of childlessness to break down the binary (Letherby, 2002).

11   Nonetheless, the lack of appropriate vocabulary to describe this complexity persists. As noted by Rebecca Harrington (2019, 23): "´Child*free*´, with its neoliberal implications, suggests *choice* but can also (falsely) imply a negative attitude toward children, while ´child*less*´ signifies an *absence* or infertility." In other words, both terms mirror a pronatalist and patriarchal culture wherein having children remains the norm (Ibid). Following these terms, people necessarily *do not want* children or *cannot* have them. Therefore, the desire not to have children is necessarily portrayed in negative terms. Despite these unsatisfactory formulations, I usually use the term 'voluntarily childless' to describe my interlocutors. First, it merges the 'voluntary-involuntary' and the 'childless-childfree' wordings. Furthermore, as discussed in chapter 6, my interlocutors generally did not embody the childfree identity. Finally, the notion of choice is particularly ambiguous when we think of reproductive intentions amidst ecological crises.

12   Julie exclaimed during the interview: "I don't feel like we have the choice (*raise of voice*), but rather there is no possible return towards an environment... mmh... as good as the one of our parents."[2] To her, the situation is just too bad to have children. In a more nuanced tone, Thomas expressed that he does not face a *real* choice. He wished he could ask himself the question of parenthood in better material circumstances (his words) – namely, in a world that would take serious action to avoid ecological disasters. Nonetheless, he recognised that these material circumstances did not fully constrain him. He could have opted out of parenthood even in a stable world. Therefore, having children is simultaneously a personal choice and an impossible one, at the nexus between agency and structural constraints. Differently, Thaïs and Odile told me that if they *really* wanted kids, they could have them despite the environmental and social context. Thaïs expressed: "I am not necessarily angry about the fact that [environmental changes] keep me from dreaming of myself as a mom [...] If I want a

kid, I can also have one... I would just have to seriously think about what I have to offer them and all." As opposed to Julie and Thomas, she does not experience climate change as materially preventing her from having children, and she considers that she has the choice to start a family or not.

13   Besides the idea that choice may be constrained by degrading environmental circumstances, other elements blur the 'voluntary-involuntary' distinction. On the one hand, most of my interlocutors understood procreation as the result of a conscious choice that they have to make at some point. "I don't feel like it is a surrender, I really don't. It's more like affirming a choice..." exclaimed Val during her interview. Similarly, Odile confided that she likes to control her life and would not claim that opting out of parenthood was not a genuine choice. It is the reason why she informs herself a lot and regularly sets out the pros and cons of starting a family. Reflecting on the fact that having children is a socially constructed phenomenon, highly encouraged by society, Noé underlined the necessity to ask oneself: is it my own choice or not? In this regard, my interlocutors' conceptions largely recall the notions of the "procreative norm" (Bajos and Ferrand, 2006) and "stable environment" (Dow, 2016). People must reflect on their decision to have children, and it seems reasonable only when the living conditions of the future child are optimal.

14   While these understandings convey the idea that my interlocutors' childlessness is voluntary, the question becomes more complex when introducing the notion of desire. For instance, Alix first explained during the interview: "I quickly realised that I didn't have that need in me." At the same time, she added later that having children was not a matter of instinct any more, as opposed to earlier times. The same holds for Val. She simultaneously asserted a choice and explained that she had never had a maternal instinct. Simply put, neither Alix nor Val desired to become mothers, and they transformed a state of things – desire – into a conscious choice.

15   We will return to the desire-choice continuum in chapter 6 since it also refers to the "burden of proof" that my interlocutors face to explain their positions regarding parenthood. What is important for now is recognising that my interlocutors experience various levels of desire to become parents – a key element in understanding their paths towards 'environmental childlessness'. To start with, Antoine is the only one who clearly stated that he has always wanted children and still does. Marie similarly expressed desire, but she instead projected that it might increase in the future. Then, Louis and Noé admitted that having children might be a great experience – though Noé is sure that he will not have children. Odile and Marion both used to imagine they would have children but realised that they would not necessarily as they were not sure of their desire. Finally, the rest of my interlocutors belong to the "early-articulators" category. They recounted that they more or less never wanted kids and are more confident about remaining childless than the rest of the group.

3.3 Multiple Pathways toward Childlessness: Autonomy, Self-Optimisation, and Resistance

16   With regards to the weaknesses of the social change explanations and pervasive pronatalism outlined above, scholars have generally underlined the necessity to understand what is propelling people to adopt a childfree lifestyle. Having discussed the concept of 'choice' – central to Western representations of parenthood – I will now

underscore the multiplicity of voluntarily childless people's motives. On the one hand, the search for greater gender equality and the restructuring of the family continue to be advanced: greater freedom, nourishing relationships with partners, career considerations and monetary advantages. On the other hand, motives such as general dislike of children, doubts about the ability to parent, concerns about population growth and concern about physical aspects of childbirth also appear in the literature (see Houseknecht 1987; Park, 2005; Tillich, 2019).

17   According to Volsche (2019, 87), the reasons for living the childfree life have not changed since the first half of the twentieth century and reflect the emergence of an autonomous, postmodern self. She describes childfree people as individuals who appear mostly adjusted to social norms while finding happiness outside the dominant cultural script and who embrace the opportunity to live a life for oneself seeking autonomy, authenticity, and efficacy (Ibid, 14-15). Similarly, Debest (2014) argues that the decision to remain childfree particularly underlines the tension between liberal and family values. Here, voluntarily childless people are conceived as performers of neoliberal values based on the improvement of one's capacities and life. It also strongly underscores Emma Tillich's (2019) conceptualisation of sterilisation as a manifestation of a subversive culture of self-optimisation. Optimising contraception is a way to optimise life and to keep control over the procreative body so that unexpected and undesired pregnancy cannot disrupt the course of life.

18   Gillespie (2003), on the contrary, tries to counter explanations that tend to depict new forms of 'neoliberal individualism'. She hopes to offer a fuller account of the meaning given to 'voluntary childlessness' by the women concerned. She suggests that even though some women forgo motherhood for motives such as career and enhanced financial position – or broader advantages associated with a childfree lifestyle – a more radical rejection of motherhood is taking place for other women. To her, this rejection informs considerable changes in social understandings of gender identity: motherhood does not unanimously stand at the cornerstone of feminine identity (Ibid, 123).

19   Following a similar feminist perspective, Tracy Morison et al. (2016) looked at childlessness under the prism of resistance, as they understand responses to the pronatalist mandate as "discursive practices that either reinforce or resist dominant norms, and in so doing shape the reproductive possibilities available to people" (Ibid, 184-85). By playing with the malleable notion of 'choice' – either mobilising a "childfree-by-choice script" or the "disavowal of choice script" – participants in the study reinforce the idea that parenthood is a rational, reasonable, and reflexive choice or the idea that they have not really chosen but are simply not made for parenting. While I support the idea that some voluntarily childless people understand their reproductive decisions as a form of political resistance to dominant social norms, this approach flirts with the over-simplifying agency-domination dichotomy. It is reductive to imagine that having or not having children and the discourse adopted to motivate that decision are either reinforcing or resisting dominant social norms. Gillespie (2000, 232) described voluntarily childless women as constructing their identity by drawing on certain cultural stereotypes while resisting others, a process that exemplifies how difficult it is to break away from dominant cultural discourses.

20   In the image of the diversity underscored in the literature, my interlocutors referred to multiple reasons to opt out of parenthood throughout the interviews: Emile mentioned visceral disgust for pregnancy, Noé confided that he felt incapable of raising a child and

of limiting the suffering inherent to existence, Marie feared failing to reproduce the environment in which she grew up, Louis felt uncomfortable with the idea that parents influence their children to become something that they expect. Such diversity is not surprising if we recall that the only 'recruitment criteria' to this study was that 'they interrogate parenthood based on *mainly* environmental concerns.' However, alongside these motives, which emerged here and there during the conversations, a few elements appeared more systematically.

21 Following the research presented above, my interlocutors mentioned autonomy and flexibility. "Not having children is really a guarantee that you will be able to make all the choices you want, within the limits of society", explained Julie. Val valued the possibility of suddenly changing the direction of her life and travelling the world (using a slow-travel mode, she specified). Thomas valued the freedom to work abroad. Overall, they celebrated the possibility of managing time, money, and opportunities without constraints (except Antoine who did not see any advantage to childlessness). Nevertheless, my findings suggest that the homogenised portrayal of the 'autonomous' and 'individualistic' self inaccurately describes my interlocutors. First, the notion of 'freedom' surfaced when my interlocutors were asked about the advantages of living a childfree life and was not mentioned as a motive. Second, they anchored the desire to benefit from their time in their wishes to pursue their political activities or to adopt radically alternative lifestyles in the future. Third, following Gillespie (2003), I could discern more radical and politicised rejections of parenthood.

22 Regarding the last point, widely-shared feminist concerns mainly occurred among women. For some of them, feminism played a major role in their awareness that they did not necessarily aspire to motherhood. Thaïs explained that she first became aware of motherhood when she realised around the age of 16 that society expected her to become a mother. Denouncing the symbolic meaning attached to motherhood, Julie similarly expressed:

> "I was tired of the questions... of this idea that a woman must necessarily go through motherhood to be fulfilled [...] So it's a way of saying: 'Here, no, I'm a woman, and fuck you and I won't have children!'"

23 Odile, Thaïs, Marion, and Julie further emphasised that women remain the principal worker in the family and are held responsible for most of the education. 'Motherhood' is a commitment that pushes women to forget about themselves. Similar rejection of the heteronormative nuclear family characterises the group. For instance, Louis primarily factored in the fear of reproducing both gendered parental roles and education: "To what extent will I be able to not recreate a couple that has children with all this gender stuff that is attributed to this or that thing." Overall, they found the dominant model of 'making family' unattractive and individualistic. They negatively depicted the traditional pathway towards adulthood: 'find a partner, a job, a dog, a house and, finally, a kid' on several occasions. They often offered detailed descriptions of their friends' lifestyles to explain that it sometimes seems unsatisfactory. For example, Marion recounted that one of her friends became very closed in on herself, afraid of doing things with her child and that it affected their relationship. She observed:

> "I say to myself 'fuck but all this is really the opposite of the world I want' [...] I'm looking for models of couples who are a bit different from that [...] I know that there are also couples who decide to sell their house and, I don't know, to go and

travel even with a small child… but I don't have any of them around me at the moment."

24   The subsequent chapters further develop why the autonomous and individualistic picture of childfree people does not captivate my interlocutors. Indeed, the significant weight of environmental and ethical considerations inscribe their childlessness within dynamics of resistance to global environmental changes and dominant ways of living.

NOTES

1. There is no single demographic transition theory but multiple and competing explanations about the importance of economic development, education, employment, contraception etc. (see Mason 1997). Nevertheless, the certainly over-simplifying link between 'development' and fertility decrease is observed.

2. The participants' words have been translated from French into English by myself.

4. Reconsidering Parenthood for Environmental Reasons

1   Having exposed the complex assemblage of reasons that have shaped my interlocutors' pathways towards childlessness so far, an inevitable question arises: how to isolate the environmental dimension in their narratives. First and foremost, it is essential to distinguish between two groups within my interlocutors. On the one hand, some explained that they called parenthood into question when they became aware of the critical environmental situation. On the other hand, there are those for whom this situation is an element that confirms or strengthens a pre-existing desire not to parent.

2   Marie, who had become a reference in my exploration of 'environmental childlessness', belongs to the first group, alongside Antoine and Noé. She started the interview by saying: "the larger ecological question emerged first and maybe led to me questioning myself as to whether or not I wanted children earlier than [...] if I hadn't asked myself about contemporary climate [debates]." In this regard, Marie is one of those who most explicitly linked her questioning of parenthood to environmental degradation and climate change. She told me that she feels deeply affected by the current environmental degradation and cried during the interview. She recounted how she feels torn between desire and rationale: "I feel like my own conflict is going to be there [...] actually what are you doing with this visceral need [to have children] if it's all of a sudden getting bigger?" Later, she added: "It's really going to be head against heart."

3   Her experience highly resembles that of Antoine. When we met, he told me that having children had been the number one goal in his life until two years ago. When he became aware of the environmental situation, a period during which he could hardly sleep at night, his life suddenly felt highly uncertain: "I went from 'I couldn't be more certain [...] that I want kids' to 'I don't think I really want kids.'" What distinguishes Marie's and Antoine's characters and particularity is that they were some of the few who wanted to have children.[1] As discussed earlier, the others were more ambivalent about their desire to have children.

4   Compared to Marie and Antoine, it was more difficult to grasp whether the environmental situation redefined Noé's reproductive intentions. On the one hand he expressed that he imagined himself with children because 'that is the way it should be.'

On the other hand, he said several times that he understood that some people desire children. Overall, Noé would have enjoyed starting a family, but he could not do so after becoming aware of the consequences of such a decision.[2] For that reason, he stands next to Marie and Antoine, and I consider that the environmental situation seriously challenged each of their previous conceptions of procreation, the family, and the lives they would have.

5 While Marie, Antoine and Noé somehow felt prevented from pursuing a desire (or at least one life plan among others), different interlocutors expressed that the environmental motive adds another layer to a pre-existing hesitation about parenthood. "I think that ecology has come to add a layer," explained Marion. Interestingly, several of my interlocutors presented the environmental dimension as a tool to ground sensations in more tangible things. Thomas reflected: "[Ecology] comes indeed, I think, to confirm and, at least, to give a more concrete form to something which was vague, which I had difficulty expressing." Emile offered a more detailed account during the collective discussion:

> "Developing environmental thinking and adding a... in fact for me it was really 'adding a theoretical edge to a decision' [...] it was a way like any other – because I have several arguments that justify for me and for others this decision [...] It was something that allowed me to justify and to have ... not just a visceral thing, but to have a little more global vision of that... and also to cement [my decision]."[3]

6 Having distinguished these two main groups, it is evident that environmental degradation does not play the same role in my interlocutors' pathways towards environmental childlessness. It even calls into question the possibility of using the term 'environmental childlessness' to describe the second group. Nonetheless, even for those who always felt that children would not necessarily be for them, environmental concerns were in the background of their narratives and experiences. The general statement is that the current context is inappropriate and even less attractive. Among several others, Gaspard expressed: "I don't particularly want to have children, but even less under these conditions!" But how had they become concerned by the environmental situation to a level that reshapes their life desires and aspirations? What types of environmental concerns appear in their reproductive interrogations? I will address these questions in the coming sections.

4.1 From the Protection of Landscapes to Apocalypse

7 'New environmentalism' – marked as 'new' to differentiate it from earlier nature protection movements that go back to the end of the nineteenth century (Cotgrove 1982) – emerged in the 1960s. Alongside other 'new social movements', it was profoundly anti-industrial, rejected the work ethic, condemned consumerism and material values, and questioned the unshakeable rationality of western societies (Ibid, 12). During that period, several key reports were published – among others, *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) set the tone, marking the reinforcement of an ongoing call to economic degrowth to avoid systemic crises. Back then, the rise of environmentalism appeared as a historical shift in the ethos of industrial societies. This trajectory similarly holds for Switzerland. While the pioneers of the movement advocated for the protection of landscapes, the conservation of natural monuments, and the creation of national reserves, the protest culture of May '68 gave a different tone to the movement (Giugni and Passy, 1997). Following the development of political

ecology, the environment was no longer perceived as a mere object to be defended but became the subject of a greater will of social transformation (Ibid, 114). Less influential that in the well-known example of Germany, the Swiss ecological movement nonetheless reshaped the political landscape and established, in the long run, a struggle that has gained momentum since 2018, alongside youth-led movements across Europe. Nowadays, Switzerland is characterised by a significantly high level of environmental concerns: 40% of the population considers that the environmental situation is the most concerning current problem (MIS Trend, 2019).

8 At the societal level, different theories explain why environmental values erupted in the second half of the twentieth century. The "reflection hypothesis" was first put forward to explain the rise in environmental consciousness and interprets it as a direct reaction to the worsening situation (Hannigan 1995). This perspective has been rapidly challenged because, despite the accelerated deterioration of the environment since the beginning of the century, the public has ignored it for most of this period (Ibid). Rather than a direct reaction to environmental change, the political scientist Ronald Inglehart (1977; 1990) argued that environmental values emerged in relation to increased financial security in the post-Second World War generations. Unprecedented levels of economic development have led to gradual cultural changes, encapsulated in what he calls a shift from materialist to post-materialist values. From giving top priority to physical sustenance and safety, a significant segment of the privileged population in Western countries progressively emphasised belonging, self-expression, and quality of life (Inglehart 1981, 880).

9 Nonetheless, the link between post-materialist values and the ecological movement was not central to Inglehart's hypothesis. Stephen Cotgrove (1982) is the scholar who more explicitly argued that environmentalists were those who were most likely to adopt these new values compared to other target groups he studied – e.g. industrialists (Hannigan 1995, 25). Examining the polarisation of views between those who believe us to be rushing headlong into catastrophe and others who look forward with confidence to a cornucopian future, he went beyond Inglehart's needs/satisfaction explanation of post-materialist values. Cotgrove argued that the ideological significance of rejecting the hegemony of economic values could not be reduced to the idea that "one places the greatest subjective value on those things that are in relatively short supply" (Inglehart 1981, 881).

10 Simply put, the rejection of materialist values is part of a more general utopia that aspires to a different social ideal where harmony with nature, justice, and the search for deeper human meaning and significance are guaranteed (Cotgrove 1982, 52, 100). Indeed, he observed that various social and political beliefs were more significantly correlated to environmental concerns than demographic variables. Hence, his work belongs to the larger efforts deployed to refute the idea that environmental concerns are restricted to wealthy social classes (e.g. Mohai 1985; Morrison and Dunlap 1986; Brechin and Kempton 1994). At the same time, this observation does not prevent us from noting that the environmental movement contains a class dimension. Jasmine Lorenzini, a political science researcher at the University of Geneva, observed that the movement created an alliance between generations but not between social classes (Schläfli, 2020). My sample – predominantly composed of white, privileged individuals – also underscores that 'environmental childlessness' is a highly situated phenomenon, organised alongside social class and racial divides.

11 Although the post-materialist argument leads to the classist view according to which people in 'developing' countries lack environmental values (Brechin and Kempton 1994; Dunlap and York, 2009), it interestingly recalls the post-modern individual described by scholars who explored voluntary childlessness. Post-modern individuals embody post-materialist values because they care for higher quality of life and aspire to greater fulfilment. However, Cotgrove implemented post-materialist values in a broader utopia that goes far beyond the search for personal fulfilment and self-actualisation. Certainly, such ecological and political aspirations better explain my interlocutors' relationship to post-materialist values than the quest for personal pleasure. Indeed, my interlocutors' awareness of environmental problems is inseparable from anti-capitalist and feminist claims. With the exception of those who were less politicised – i.e. Alix mentioned minimalist ways of living as something that she simply found pleasant – my interlocutors' aspirations to non-materialist values were informed by collective goals. For instance, Marion explained that 'European comfort' is not necessarily what makes her the happiest:

> "Yes, it's cool to have heating, and of course I'm not going to question that, and to have a computer and to talk to you through the screen, it's really nice... and at the same time... yeah... to understand the cost that this comfort has on others, in fact it makes me a little bit sick! It's... to me, limiting my footprint... it is a way to allow the others to live well".

12 Rejecting material values, reducing consumption, and limiting their ecological footprint characterise my interlocutors' embodiment of environmental values. Some explained their commitment to these values by emphasising early socialisation to ecology and childhood memories of 'loving nature'. Others, who grew up in families where ecology was not predominant, emphasised the role of media, scientific information, social mobilisations that have shaken up Switzerland since 2018, and discussions with partners and friends.

13 Finally, to describe the context in which my interlocutors developed environmental concerns, it is essential to underline the greater sense of urgency that characterises the environmental movement nowadays, compared to fifty years ago. Indeed, scientific publications predicting catastrophic developments and collapse multiply and become more and more substantiated (Servigne and Stevens, 2015, 16). As noted by the essayist David Wallace-Wells (2017), "the many sober-minded scientists I interviewed over the past several months [...] have quietly reached an apocalyptic conclusion, too: No plausible program of emissions reductions alone can prevent climate disaster." For a long time, nuclear imaginaries and climate competed to mirror ideas of planetary crisis and continue to impede the recognition of 'collapse' as a plausible and progressive chain of crises that will continue to increase human societies' vulnerabilities and inequalities. According to Joseph Masco (2010; 2015), it is precisely this confusion between the slow disasters of the Anthropocene and nuclear apocalypse that has prevented political mobilisation against the former in the United States.

14 From the protection of natural landscapes and resources to fighting against environmental injustices, 'collapse' has now entered public and academic discussions on global environmental changes. The reliance of ecologists on scientific knowledge to legitimise the plausibility of collapse, and the recognition that apocalyptic imaginaries are not restricted to environmental discourses – nor should we date them back to the recent emergence of 'collapsology' – are important dimensions that we should problematise. However, regarding the scope and purpose of this research, it is

sufficient to underline that the boundary between 'scientific' and 'cataclysmic' views has become much thinner. Taking into account the diversity and heterogeneity that characterise 'the environmental movement', the metaphor that 'we're going straight into the wall' is now widely shared. Therefore, being an 'ecologist' nowadays means, to some extent, being in contact with information and discourses that forecast large-scale crises.

15 Several of my interlocutors explicitly referred to collapse theories developed by Pablo Servigne and other 'collapsologists'. A conference, reading, or documentary are the kinds of transformative moments they mentioned. However, accessing collapsologist discourses was not their only entry point. Antoine recounted the critical role of his internship at International Environment House (IEH), which gathers a range of United Nations and non-governmental organisations active in the field of environment and sustainable development in Geneva. Over some months, he had been in contact with scientific reports that forecast worsening environmental and climatic conditions. That these scientists produce alarming reports even under certain economic biases was the most revealing for Antoine. Given the biases, it is more likely that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports present their best-case scenario. Having broadly contextualised the emergence of environmental values, emphasised that my interlocutors embrace social transformation more than mere protection of biodiversity, and exposed that they are familiar with the notion of 'collapse', I now turn more specifically to the entanglement between reproduction and environmental issues.

4.2 Against Malthus

16 "When women don't have children for ecology",[4] read the title of an article in the Swiss Newspaper *Le Temps* (Rambal, 2016). Trying to warm up the crowds, the journalist continues: these "*écolos-féministes*" are turning their backs on motherhood to lighten their carbon footprint in the name of global warming and rampant overpopulation. In French, the term "*écolo*" is often used in negative ways, and the tone of the article was overall mocking and disapproving of people who renounce parenthood for environmental reasons. Here, the problem is that the article portrays only one aspect of the environmental motive: having children increases one's environmental footprint and consumption of natural resources in a world already overpopulated.[5] According to a study published in *Environmental Research Letters*, having one fewer child is one of the four recommended individual actions that have the highest potential to contribute to reducing CO_2 emissions (Wynes and Nicholas, 2017). A baby would consume 58 tons of CO_2 per year, while the combination of a vegetarian diet (an average of 0.8 tons per year), stopping air travel (1.6 tons), and using a car (2.4 tons) would save a total of 4.8 tons per year. Simply put, refusing parenthood becomes an ecological behaviour, similar to buying organic food. This translation of babies into tons of CO_2 echoes neo-Malthusian views, and a growing body of literature focuses on the effects of changes in population numbers on global CO_2 emissions (see O'Neill et al., 2010; 2012). The point is simple: "[S]lowing population growth could provide 16-29% of the emissions reductions suggested to be necessary by 2050 to avoid dangerous climate change" (O'Neill et al., 2010, 17521).

17   According to Schneider-Mayerson and Leong (2020), although the application of the individualised "carbon footprint" to reproductive choice is a form of a decades-old Malthusian concern about overpopulation, it also marks the emergence of a new concept. The notion of "carbon footprint" has become popular during the past ten years (see Turner, 2014; Whitington, 2016), and was first applied to reproductive practices by Paul A. Murtaugh and Michael G. Schlax under the concept of "carbon legacy" (2009). Through the notion of "legacy", attention is turned not only to the immediate effects caused by each offspring over their lifetime, but to the future reproductive decisions of children (Ibid). Therefore, reproductive decisions have long-term impacts that affect both consumption practices and future population numbers.

18   This perspective is that of a few GINKS (Green Inclination, No Kids) that the media constantly refer to. The movement originated in the United States in 2011 under the impulse of Lisa Hymas, a journalist who is also part of the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT). She explicitly reactivates discourses that were held by environmental activists who advocated for population degrowth as she quotes Stephanie Mills' famous "the most humane thing to do is to have no children" (Hymas, 2010). In her view, environmental and reproductive issues are intrinsically connected since the latter necessarily harms the former. That she understands antinatalism as a solution to environmental degradation is what conveys her neo-Malthusian inspiration.

19   Before continuing, I would like to briefly develop the reasons why neo-Malthusian views generate polarised reactions. Indeed, discomfort is sometimes palpable when one evokes exponentially increasing human numbers as having a negative impact on the planet. Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population* was first published in 1798, marking the birth of the concept of natural limits to the earth's capacity (Ojeda, Sasser, and Lunstrum, 2020). His arguments consisted of a complex brew of ideas about technology, poverty and poor people, trade and international borders, birth control, and the environment (Robertson, 2012, 4). For our purpose, it is probably sufficient to highlight that basic needs underwrote his thinking: "First, that food is necessary to the existence of man. Secondly that the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state" (Malthus in Bashford, 2014, 31). However, the power of the earth to produce food is lower than the power of humans to reproduce. Therefore, the balance between the two must be kept equal by various natural and human interventions, otherwise humanity would be on its way out (Ibid).

20   More than a century and a half later, environmental scholars and activists updated Malthus' ideas. According to historian Thomas Robertson (2012), an unusual alignment of historical forces made Malthusianism very attractive from the 1940s to the early 1970s. While physical factors and changes in the global ecosystem played a significant role (never before had the number of humans on the planet been as high or grown as fast as during the second half of the twentieth century), "dramatic international events directed a powerful spotlight on these material changes" (Ibid, 222). The ghost of Malthus was fully revived in the late 1960s when economic growth, suburbanisation, the civil rights movement, the food crisis in India, and the Vietnam War came to a boil. Abroad, population growth was linked more to social instability and vulnerability to communism than environmental degradation (Coole, 2013). In the United States and, to a greater extent overseas, neo-Malthusian ideas lead governments and physicians to commit unethical abuses such as forced sterilisation campaigns (Robertson, 2012, 9–10). In this regard, the 'population question' is an excellent example of "stratified

reproduction", a term first coined by Shellee Colen (e.g. 1990) to describe "the power relations by which some categories of people are empowered to nurture and reproduce, while others are disempowered" (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995, 3).

21   Since the 1980s, feminist scholars, alongside organisations such as the Committee on Women, Population, and the Environment (CWPE), denounced the limits and dangers of the 'population argument' (see Hartmann 1987; Bandarage 1997; Silliman and King 1999). Following the criticism of neo-Malthusianism that emerged in the field of political ecology, their central argument is that emphasising 'population' misdiagnoses the causes of climate change by blaming marginalised populations in the so-called 'Global South'. Simply put, they do not believe that environmental degradation is linked to human numbers and denounce demographic alarmism as it generates coercive birth control policies. More recently, Ojeda and her colleagues (2020) argued that the 'Anthropocene' dangerously updates notions of the 'limits to growth', reinstating the centrality of population growth. Agreeing with earlier oppositions to 'population', they call us to reactivate anti-Malthusian arguments in a context where we are increasingly thinking of the 'human' as a geological force. Undoubtedly, the 'population question' has never disappeared, and essential drivers of neo-Malthusian discourses are international organisations such as the United Nations Population Fund or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (e.g. UNFPA, 2012; IPCC, 2014). Indeed, Bathia *et* al. (2020) argued that population control is not history. Instead, since the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo prompted a discursive shift from population control to reproductive health, "powerful forces have erased the language 'control' within population discourses" (Ibid, 334).

22   Having exposed the dangers of reviving neo-Malthusian frameworks, I would like to underline the over-simplification and homogenisation of people who are calling parenthood into question for environmental reasons. Many of the people interviewed by the media probably do not self-identify as "GINKS", nor is it likely that they believe that everyone should stop having children and be sterilised. Indeed, a few articles offer a more nuanced account and highlight the fears that underlie the decision of whether or not to have children. In a different tone, the following title proclaims: "These young people who refuse to have children, between ecological action and anxiety about the future" (Iribarnegaray, 2020).[6] Here, not having children is portrayed as a response to environmental crises not only because procreation has consequences on the environment but because future children will live in dire climate circumstances. Jessica Wei, a freelance writer based in Toronto, wrote an article for *the Guardian* series on childfree people. She confided:

> "As I sit here, confined to my living room during a devastating pandemic and under the looming threat of a rapidly heating planet, I feel as if my own future is slowly disappearing from this world. How would any child of mine fare?" (Wei, 2020).

23   Next to overpopulation, it appears that deep anxieties about uncertain futures affect the decision to have children. A few recent initiatives raise awareness of the impacts of environmental degradation on procreation rather than the impacts of procreation on the environment. The BirthStrike campaign in the United Kingdom and the Conceivable Future Project[7] manifest the increasing awareness that climate changes endanger reproductive justice. Worried that the planet would not support their children, members of these communities explain that they cannot ignore the environmental situation and call for political action from governments. Birthstrikers, who belong to the larger category of 'childless people', mainly express that they cannot

bring themselves to have children (although they might wish to) as they cannot predict to what degree they will be forced to live in a 'survival mode'. Both these movements mobilise the symbolic power of reproduction to denounce political apathy towards fighting climate change; calling parenthood into question becomes a political tool. Finally, as stated by the launcher of BirthStrike, Blythe Pepino, the campaign should not be confused with 'overpopulation' discourses (Extinction Rebellion UK, 2020). Openly anti-Malthusian, it is clear to her that population is not the problem, as opposed to capitalism and overconsumption.

24   These examples primarily recall the results of the first empirical research focused on people who factor climate change into their reproductive choices (Schneider-Mayerson and Leong, 2020). The authors report that "concern about the carbon footprint of procreation was dwarfed by respondents' concern for the well-being of their existing, expected, or hypothetical children in a climate-changed future" (Ibid, 7). 59.8% of participants reported being "very" or "extremely" concerned about the carbon footprint of procreation. Meanwhile, 96.5% of respondents were "very" or "extremely" concerned about the well-being of existing, expected, or hypothetical children in a climate-changed world. As I will discuss in the coming section, my discussions with people who call parenthood into question for environmental reasons sustain that people are highly concerned by the environmental conditions that their potential children would experience.

4.3 Overpopulation, Uncertainty, and Anti-capitalism

25   Vis-à-vis the above discussion and my interlocutors' experiences it is useful to distinguish three types of environmental concerns that (re)shape reproductive decisions. Firstly, people are concerned about the direct environmental impacts of children – i.e., offspring consume and reproduce in a limited world. I broadly refer to that idea through the notion of 'overpopulation.' Secondly, people express concerns about the future. I use the term 'environmental uncertainty' when my interlocutors express thoughts about a potentially uninhabitable world. The last concern somehow breaks up the 'overpopulation-uncertainty' continuum depicted in the last section. People are concerned about the indirect environmental impacts of children – i.e. the necessity to buy a car. Indeed, several of my interlocutors mentioned that starting a family indirectly pushes people to adopt a lifestyle that greatly rests on the consumption of industrial products. These types of concern appear to belong to a broader desire to participate as little as possible in consumer society. Although 'anti-consumerism' does not translate into 'anti-capitalism', my interlocutors mentioned that they considered capitalism to be the origin of a vast majority of environmental and social problems. Therefore, I use 'anti-capitalism' when describing this third stance.

26   As I explained earlier, environmental dimension, understood as any of these three types of concern, does not play the same role in all my interlocutors' pathways towards childlessness. Without considering the complex assemblage discussed in chapter 3, I will now focus on what types of environmental argument my interlocutors mobilised and in what order. I consider that the order is relevant because it gives a sense of priority to some motives. Moreover, I sometimes prompted their narratives by asking "are there other environmental reasons behind your interrogations?" or "how do you

theoretically make the connection between reproduction and environmental problems?"

27 Alix is the type of person with whom it was a little harder to create a fluid discussion. She was highly committed to childlessness and sure of her decision. She explained that we are too populous on Earth and that having children while maintaining a 'green' lifestyle has a cost. When I explained that I tend to prioritise uncertainty rather than overpopulation, she recalled that future circumstances initially played a role:

> "At this time I said to myself 'yeah, no, I can't impose that on a child'...well, I am finding it very... well, I am finding it very hard... I don't like the situation we're in at all, so how can I force a child [...] and it's true that, at that time, I said to myself, 'just for that reason, I don't want to do it.'"

28 However, because she is now sure that she does not want children, the future well-being of her child plays a minor role. Her key arguments are overpopulation and overconsumption. Similarly to Alix, Noé significantly insisted on the importance of overpopulation. In his view, the nodal problem of our ecological troubles is human numbers:

> "[T]here 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".

29 Later during the interview, he referred to hardly inhabitable futures. Before going to a lecture given by Pablo Servigne, Noé thought that things would eventually work out. He described the role of this conference:

> "It put me in doubt in fact, even if it is not a certainty, it is a bit of a rigorous process that shows that... 'at the moment we are at this point, if it goes on like this there is a strong chance that we will reach this point' and I just said to myself... given the little time left, if I have a child, by the time it gets to that point, [the child] will be small... and... it's going to be complicated."

30 In the end, he completed his initial reflection about limited natural resources with a broader reflection on the ethics of life, exacerbated by a potentially dire future. Marion's trajectory is very close to that of Noé. Marion first came up with the overpopulation argument and, more recently, she became interested in collapsology. However, both seem to play a more equivalent role in her reproductive interrogations than was the case for Noé. Indeed, her perspective was less inspired by anti-natalism and overpopulation:

> "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 and then I think that the... the summum was when I started to be interested, I would say two years ago, in the theories of collapse, of collapses... where I said to myself 'wow what a shitty world! and... the future is going to be very dark'... well, we could make it less dark, but it's not very happy."

31 Val, on her side, directly mentioned both overpopulation and uncertainty. While her reflection resembles Noé and Marion's, I could not grasp any sense of priority in her discourse.

32 Closely to the views revealed above, Gaspard and Thaïs took both uncertainty and overpopulation into account. Nonetheless, they started with uncertainty before emphasising the environmental impacts of procreation without being prompted. Gaspard explained: "I have absolutely no certainty that I will be able to live serenely as part of this capitalist society [...] [and] for someone who is born now, it will be even worse". Here, Gaspard compared his own feelings with someone born in the coming years and argued that they will necessarily feel worse because there are no signs of improvement. He complemented his concerns about the future of his potential children by explaining that it was not desirable from a global perspective to continue bringing additional people onto Earth. However, he did not use the term 'overpopulation' and quickly moved on. Similarly, Thaïs depicted uncertainty by expressing that, given scientific predictions, she was not sure she could provide water, food, and security to her children. Later, she sadly noted that the connection between demography and the environmental crisis was surprisingly absent during her studies in sustainability. Following this observation, she explained:

> "well, I'm also weighing up the issue... like what do I really have to gain from this? uh, to put [my child] in danger anyway, and to put all the other people who already exist on Earth in danger even more? Because... I'm going to say something really not politically correct but it's true... one more child on Earth is a potential polluter."

33 Differently, Odile, Adrien, and Thomas mentioned the environmental impacts of procreation only when I asked them how they theoretically understand the link between reproduction and environmental changes. If I had not specifically asked that question, I would probably still believe that uncertainty is what underscores their decision. Like Thaïs, Adrien and Thomas mentioned that children are polluters when prompted about other links they see between reproduction and environmental degradation. Differently, Odile referred to 'overpopulation' in sensorial terms. She went through what she calls her "climatic depression" and, since then, her life in Switzerland constantly reminds her that we are not going in the right direction. Simply put, having children does not feel right. Only when I prompted her, she recounted:

> "I just don't want to add a kid in there, I think it's still related to that, demographic stuff actually. We all like to have a little space, a little room, etc. and to tell myself that we'll have to start cramming in [...] but even the M1 [subway], when you see it cramped with people, I just don't want to. I don't know... it's... it's instinctive more than theoretical."

34 It is now relevant to discuss the views of those who ignored overpopulation. While Antoine, Emile, and Louis expressed arguments against overpopulation, Marie and Julie simply did not mention this argument. To the former, racism and classism infuse overpopulation discourses. Emile recounted that they had been confronted with a highly problematic argument which, according to them, was a variation of population discourses. During a discussion, some friends told them that the adoption of children from countries where living conditions are precarious was an anti-ecologist decision. The reason is that adopted children necessarily consume more once they are raised in western countries. Emile had been shocked by this argument and, since then, preferred to ask 'how can we live with so many people on Earth?' Realistically asking this question would allow us to distance ourselves from understanding population reduction as a solution to environmental problems. Even if we 'fix' the 'population problem', capitalism and progressionist ideology will not disappear. Louis and Antoine, similarly to the arguments generally articulated against overpopulation discourses,

explained that emphasising demography was 'toxic' because it leads to the idea that human numbers should decrease in high fertility countries – countries which have generally contributed the least to climate change and will suffer the most from it.

35　While the continuum between overpopulation and uncertainty structured most of our exchanges, the underlying dimension of 'anti-capitalism' also structured some of my interlocutors' positions towards parenthood. First, some of them understood the nuclear family as a nodal point of participation in a system based on work and overconsumption. To illustrate that view, I refer to Gaspard, 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 uhh and our impact on the environment."

36　Evidently, Gaspard's view cannot be separated from his larger understanding of capitalism as an exploitative system. Not having children is one means among others to opt out of society – alongside being engaged in civil disobedience and anti-speciesist movements. Following the same idea, Louis expressed that starting a family leads to a particular lifestyle that is less sustainable. Odile, for her part, offered a slightly different account. While she always imagined she would have children, she has gradually questioned this conviction since she became a feminist. Furthermore, she lost faith in our current capitalist ways of living. Nevertheless, she explained that it is somehow tricky not to succumb to the system. In an intriguing way, she recounted: "I think I couldn't come to that decision about the kids' stuff without having let go of everything else... it's like, I was like, 'I've got to let go of everything else so I have no way of going back.'" While we commonly assume that not having children is a distinctive trait of being "in the margins" (her words), Odile almost reversed this logic. She had to go step by step towards "marginality" – abandoning the idea of having a career, forming a stable and monogamous couple, and having an apartment – to secure her childlessness. Therefore, she portrays childlessness as the ultimate and final layer of her desire to embody an anti-capitalist posture.

37　As a corollary of the idea that the nuclear family is a nodal point of social anchoring, some interlocutors highlighted that raising a child outside social conventions was not easy. Louis said that it was discouraging to raise children differently. Society plays a significant role in educating children, and parents do not have the monopoly on what type of values their children will be exposed to – keeping in mind that my interlocutors also rejected the idea that parents should have such a monopoly. In other words, alternative education is not socially rewarded. Similarly observing that the ways we educate children are normative, Noé expressed that children are those who pay the price when parents decide to adopt alternative education. Because our society is deeply materialist, raising a child without providing him/her with material goods similarly to other kids may be a source of harassment: "Social relationships are very important and if you're... it's sad, but if you're 'out of the box', it's going to be difficult." In the same line of thought, Louis ironically stated an imagined discussion he would have with people who would condemn his lifestyle: "Don't you take your kids on vacation? Don't you do fun things with them?" Meanwhile, raising a child within the system is not an option. It would merely mean that future children would participate in our capitalist world.

38   To summarise this section, all my interlocutors, with the exception of Alix, mentioned uncertainty without being prompted. However, it does not mean that they attribute the same importance to uncertain futures. Some of them were particularly concerned about uncertainty (Emile, Antoine, Marie, Louis, Julie), others about overpopulation (Alix, Noé), and, finally, others similarly emphasised both (Marion, Gaspard, Thaïs, Val, Adrien, Thomas, Odile). Overall, it is important to note that none of my interlocutors offered a uni-dimensional account of the environmental dimension behind childlessness. In other words, we are far from the over-simplifying picture of 'not having children is an ecological behaviour'. My interlocutors approached the interconnection between procreation and environmental problems from a variety of perspectives. Furthermore, their narratives highlight the larger meaning of reproduction. Having children means reproducing certain social norms and practices beyond people's own existence – simply put, procreation is also social reproduction.

4.4 'Save the children, don't make them': Anticipating Dark Futures

39   As I described in the previous section, the perspective according to which childlessness is the most effective strategy to limit one's environmental impact cannot be taken for granted. The well-known slogan "save the children, don't make them" – now popular in Switzerland as two of my interlocutors send me pictures of the words written on a train or a window – conveys a different orientation towards the future well-being of children. While 'uncertainty' should not be understood in opposition to 'overpopulation' – as most of my interlocutors combined the two to explain their childlessness – it nonetheless offers an alternative narrative to the dominant discourse. This section aims to further develop what kind of uncertainty drives my interlocutors' anticipation of dark futures.

40   Studying Inughuit responses to changing ice conditions in North-West Greenland, Hastrup (2018) looked at how these communities were not only reacting to altering circumstances:

> "Action is never simply a reaction to what has already happened; it is also a mode of acting upon anticipation [...] When the environment changes rapidly, the imagination is strained, and we must revisit the ways in which people seek to anticipate their world in view of the comprehensive uncertainties" (Ibid, 73).

41   The notion of "comprehensive uncertainties" interestingly recalls that of 'risk'. As argued by Ulrich Beck (2000; 2007) and Anthony Giddens (1999; 2009), 'risk' has become a cultural theme of growing importance since post-industrial societies have been trying to control uncertainty and minimise risk. Assuming that "[uncertainty is] the absence of sufficient knowledge with which to calculate risk" (Murphy, 2013, 221), risk and uncertainty are inseparable. Calculating risk became salient because "modern societies" evolved in a context where "politics [are] concerned with the interpretation and distribution of 'bads' rather than 'goods'" (Barry 1999, 152). In a way, conscious immersion in uncertainty and rising risk has replaced imaginaries of a "one-way trip to doom" (Buell, 2010, 30). Undoubtedly, environmental hazards and climate change greatly participate in this paradigmatic shift. To me, the notion of "risk society" is a good illustration of how environmental crises (re)shape the ways western societies

relate to the world: collective attention is increasingly turned to the 'future', predominantly understood as something we can forecast and manage.

42 Meanwhile, it has been argued that uncertainty is highly malleable and instrumentalised. For instance, Raymond Murphy (2013) discussed the rhetorical advantage of uncertainty and how it impedes risk management. On the one hand, uncertainty is the ultimate excuse for incompetence and allows political leaders to evade responsibility after environmental disasters. On the other hand, it is mobilised to continue "business as usual", make risks acceptable, and avoid the social change needed to mitigate global warming (Ibid). Therefore, it is important to underline the socio-political dimension of uncertainty. Simply put, we are in a situation where we are aware of environmental risks but incapable of predicting whether sufficient political action will be taken to mitigate them. As Wallace-Wells (2017) sarcastically puts it, predictions of what will happen largely depend upon the much less certain science of human response – and I would preferably speak of 'capitalist response' to avoid the kind of universalist confusion that is also implied in the 'Anthropocene' debate.

43 Wallace-Well's statement illustrates a central element of "risk society": science and technology are no longer associated with social progress, and dominant political institutions are not trusted anymore. Indeed, wide exposure to competing information marks contemporary times and this weakens the legitimacy of both science and the State. This erosion of trust is visible in Switzerland. On the one hand, 47% of the Swiss SOPHIA study participants responded negatively to whether they trust humanity, intelligence, and adaptive capacity to solve environmental problems in, 2007 (MIS Trend, 2019). This number increased by almost 15% in 2019 (Ibid). On the other hand, only about 22% of the participants considered that solutions to climate change would emerge from government measures (Ibid).

44 These trends jeopardise the representation of the 'future' as something that science necessarily controls and political institutions care for. The same observation holds for my interlocutors' relationship to science, politics, and uncertainty. Thus, for example, Thaïs criticised the view according to which solutions will emerge from science. Her words speak for themselves:

> "[T]he 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".

45 Later, as she said that taxing cars will not save humanity, Thaïs directly pointed at inappropriate political measures. Marie also stated that "[m]ore than living in a world that's going straight into the wall, it's living in a world that's going straight into the wall and turning a blind eye... that drives me crazy." Meanwhile, with the exception of Marion, Val, and Odile,[8] my interlocutors have lost faith in large-scale political action and institutions. This observation became apparent when some of them told me about the recent changes in their activist practices. Gaspard, Noé, and Julie used to take part in civil disobedience movements for animal rights. These activities being very demanding and risky, they have decided to put their energy into local initiatives with a limited number of individuals to care for. Julie confided: "I'm kind of tired of sacrificing my life for uh for a change I don't see coming." Antoine similarly explained:

> "there's a part of me that said 'anyway it's a complete failure, everything we do is a failure', I mean there's been these mobilisations for three years [and] there's absolutely nothing that changes, at least I think there's absolutely nothing that changes."

46   While I could grasp the utopias that they awaited with less and less hope – namely, a systematic and profound societal transformation of power relations across species, genders, races and human-non-human worlds – what exactly my interlocutors anticipated was essentially very blurry. Contrary to hunter societies in Greenland who adapt to melting ice conditions, perception of ecological risks (and their solutions) in Switzerland perhaps depends more on various worldviews. Whereas it recalls the various cultural models of climate change delineated by Willett Kempton (1997), it is also possible to refer to larger myths such as catastrophe and cornucopia, in Cotgrove's (1982) terms.

47   Indeed, Pablo Servigne and Raphaël Stevens (2015) have more recently distinguished between two dominant discourses that have structured the relationship of western societies to imagined futures so far: progress and collapse. I suggest that the general context of distrust described earlier reinforces the polarisation between these two myths. In a context where progress as a vision of a promising future disappears, what is left is much darker. Undoubtedly, a couple of my interlocutors clearly stated that collapse would happen. Julie confidently stated: "We're inevitably, to me, heading towards a collapse." Odile argued that collapse has already started: "I feel like it's already survival issues everywhere else, so this collapse already started a long time ago."

48   Differently, others emphasised the uncertainty that surrounds collapse even though they mentioned its potentiality. Gaspard, despite offering the most detailed account of the event chain that threatens food security in the coming decades, and who described inhabitable regions and anticipated large migration flows, stated: "I have absolutely no idea what the rest of my life will look like." Similarly, Adrien told me "[t]here is a great chance that humanity will disappear" and later added "[i]t's hard to predict the future." Additionally, Noé recounted that the Pablo Servigne conference he attended made him doubt that the world would continue to function as he knows it, even though collapse is not a certitude.

49   Rejecting the Manichean dichotomy between progress and collapse, Servigne and Stevens (2015) denounce the fact that we are not allowed to mention the word 'collapse' without being relegated to the ranks of the 'catastrophist', 'believer', or 'irrational', who have populated human societies at all times. These figures, to which we can add the 'survivalist', are too often mobilised to discredit environmental discourses. Interestingly, I experienced these reductive stereotypes several times throughout this research. Besides this discriminatory register, I often heard that anxieties about the future are not specific to our times. War, human misery and uncertainty have always existed, I was told. This is absolutely true and I am not proposing the contrary. I cannot know whether dark futures prevented people from having children in the past, but I can bring attention to the fact that current times may particularly affect reproductive choices. Hopefully, at least one piece of research shares this observation with me: "[D]eliberating whether or not to have children is now perhaps more complex than ever and arguably requires considerations above and

beyond individuals' abilities to meet basic parenting responsibilities" (Gaziulusoy, 2020, 2).

50 Indeed, whereas we can discuss the foundations and truth of collapse, what is less negotiable is that my interlocutors find it difficult to project themselves forward. For instance, Antoine explained that his life has been affected by his ecological awareness. Accustomed to the bright future that his parents had presented him, his life was suddenly much less confident than it used to be. Similarly, Emile 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 I think 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."

51 Outlining that the problem is actually that we cannot predict the future, Thaïs explained in a tone that suggested that she had already had to convince people of the severity of the situation:

> "[W]e are now saying to ourselves that in 30 years, the system will be unstable and we won't even be able to predict where we're going... the problem is that it's not even like I say to myself, 'well, it doesn't matter, we'll have a lesser quality of life', it's that I don't even know if we'll be able to eat in fact."

52 As I will further develop in the coming chapter around the notion of the 'good' life, Val 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."

53 Regarding these accounts, I argue that my interlocutors are engaged in a form of anticipation when it comes to their decision to not have children. Furthermore, their concerns over uncertain futures have already altered their life projects. Many of them have decided to work as little as possible or to find occupations related to climate change. For instance, Julie stopped her studies because it became meaningless to pursue her education in a context where she feels that the world is 'falling apart'. She now lives in the countryside as it will become more and more complicated to live in cities. Emile also recounted how they are currently creating alternatives that will hopefully serve to sustain them in the long term. For example, meeting people who also subscribe to life in community, or breaking up with the nuclear family cell, understood as something that does not create resilience amidst climate change. Their greatest fear is denial, and anticipation through imagination is seen as a tool to engage with dark futures properly:

> "[...] I'm more afraid of denial, of this thing of... of continuing to think that we'll be able to have the same life as our parents [...] and that things that make it fundamentally impossible won't happen, so I have the impression that the best way to prepare for it is to try to reinvent ourselves with a new paradigm."

54 Undoubtedly, my interlocutors' perceptions of the future are not bright and correspond, to some degree, to discourses articulated by 'collapsology'. However, rather than being irrational beings who believe in 'the end of the world', my interlocutors incorporate into their lifestyles their political beliefs regarding the inability of capitalism to sustain life in the long-run. Compared to Dow's (2016) research participant, whose anxieties were mostly directed at the natural world, it

appears that my interlocutors' insecurity results from 'socio-political uncertainty' – i.e. political apathy regarding environmental depletion and economic growth.

NOTES

1. Alongside Marie and Antoine, Marion and Odile also used to imagine a future for themselves with children. However, the environmental situation played a less important role in their recent desire not to have children.

2. I discuss the views of the interlocutors on the consequences of procreation in chapter 4 and 5.

3. I return to the need to find a justification in chapter 6.

4. The original title in French is: "Quand les femmes ne font pas d'enfant pour l'écologie."

5. See the following articles that offer similar views: Coulaud, 2018; Nicolet, 2015; Pluyaud, 2015; Sillaro, 2017.

6. The original title in French is: "Ces jeunes qui refusent d'avoir des enfants, entre acte écologique et angoisse de l'avenir."

7. See: https://conceivablefuture.org/

8. They are members of political parties or explicitly mentioned that they hope to convince elected representatives to act.

5. Having Children: An Ethical Dilemma?

1 In approaching 'environmental childlessness', I realised that both environmental issues and reproduction encountered ethical dimensions. On the one hand, environmental issues are based on humanity's place in the world and question fundamental ideas about what it means to be human (Haenn, Harnish, and Wilk, 2016, 1). While most animal species depend on intra-species relationships and the alteration of their environment to survive, how industrial and capitalist societies have rooted their development on systematic dispossession of non-human entities and minorities raises important ethical questions. 'Deep ecology', a philosophy that originates in the work of Arne Naess, has played a significant role in revitalising the idea that the environment has more than a material value. While science has depersonalised and 'disenchanted' nature to remove the sense of moral responsibility that humans used to nurture towards it, deep ecologists have argued that we should look for a "restoration of respect and the establishment of harmony in human-nature relations" (Milton, 2002, 10). Furthermore, research has demonstrated the importance of morality in understanding people's attitudes towards the environment. Kempton (1997, 18) observed that to understand why people adopt certain cultural models of climate change – i.e. models that emphasise different causes and solutions to the problem – we have to understand their values, understood as "moral guidelines they use in making decisions". Research in social psychology has also emphasised that rational choice-theories offer limited explanations when it comes to behaviours that are at least partially moral, such as ecological behaviour (e.g. Kaiser et al. 1999; see also Norgaard, 2011 about the refutation of rational-choice theory).

2 On the other hand, having children can be framed as an ethical question in and of itself. Christine Overall (2012) stresses that childbearing has to be approached as a real choice that has ethical import. Otherwise, she argues, we fail to treat childbearing as an experience that does not merely result from biological destiny and unavoidable fate (Ibid, 5). According to her, as it is commonly understood as a life choice that does not require reasons, childbearing requires more careful justification than the choice not to have children. The reason is simple: having a child means that "a new and vulnerable being is brought into existence whose future may be at risk" (Ibid, 3) and "that person

cannot [...] give consent to being brought into existence" (Ibid, 6). The most radical 'reproductive ethics' can be found in antinatalist perspectives. While the word 'antinatalism' has long been used to refer to population reduction policies, such as China's One Child Policy, its current use is mostly linked to an ethical approach to reproduction (Morioka, 2021). Central to this development is David Benatar's book *Better Never to Have Been* (2006). Justifying the universal negation of procreation, Benatar demonstrated that not being born is better than being born, based on the idea that coming into existence is always a harm.

3   My interlocutors mentioned some of these ethical concerns vis-à-vis procreation, outside any environmental consideration. For instance, Marie referred to the notion of consent. Furthermore, Noé is the only one who referred to antinatalism and challenged the value of life itself. He had read Benatar's book, and regardless of the circumstances, he considers that life is harmful. However, beyond these few examples, my interlocutors raised ethical questions that interweave environmental and reproductive issues. Indeed, when considered together, reproductive and environmental issues raise specific ethical questions. It is revealing that most research on reproductive choices in the age of climate change has been conducted in the field of applied ethics (e.g. Rieder, 2016; Conly, 2015) (Schneider-Mayerson and Leong, 2020, 2). Therefore, the purpose of the following sections is to discuss these ethical demands, the role of responsibility, and the necessity to recreate meaning amidst uncertainty. Indeed, from an anthropological perspective, the value of ethical dilemmas is found in the ways they take shape in people's lives. When applied ethics describe what is good or bad, "[t]he claim on which the anthropology of ethics rests is not an evaluative claim that people are good: it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative" (Laidlaw, 2014, 3).

5.1 Procreation: A Site of Individualistic Responsibility?

4   "Although no one of us can solve the population crisis, we all make decisions relevant to making the problem better or worse – that is, we all make procreative decisions", wrote Travis N. Rieder (2016, 9). Author of *Toward a Small Family Ethic*, the philosopher argues that we have to consider population as a variable that negatively impacts climate change. According to him, we are in this situation because we are unwilling to take action regarding the other key variable that we could work on – namely, per capita greenhouse gas emissions. Overall (2012) also dedicates one chapter of her book to overpopulation and extinction, asking what our procreative responsibilities might be in these two scenarios. Because choosing to have children is a profoundly social question that has consequences on others, and because of the dangers of planetary overload, people living in the developed world (her use) face the responsibility to limit the number of their offspring. Nonetheless, she adds, given the centrality of childbearing to human existence, an obligation to renounce it would be a sacrifice that we cannot expect of individuals who want to have children (Ibid, 181). In contrast, Laure Noualhat, a French essayist who wrote *Open letter to those who do not (yet) have children,*[1] conveyed an almost sacrificial logic when she confided: "For me, ecology is about renunciation. And the most important renunciation is not to have children" (Desprez, 2019).[2]

5   These authors provide that reproduction poses ethical dilemmas because it has consequences on others' lives. They defend the perspective exposed in chapter 4

according to which human numbers have a causal relationship with global environmental changes. Key here is the idea that the individual level of action is all that we have left to avoid the end of humanity, since we are failing to level off CO_2 emissions at a larger scale. Hence, they offer a particular understanding of 'responsibility' that falls within the broader 'individualisation' that characterises some branches of the environmental movement. Since the 1980's – a decade during which conservative forces in the US returned power and responsibility to the individual and curtailed the role of governments in a self-regulating economy (Maniates, 2001, 39) – environmental depletion has suffered from depoliticisation as both its causes and solutions are increasingly limited to the domain of personal consumption. Apparently, procreation is no exception to this logic. As highlighted by Schneider-Mayerson and Leong (2020, 13): "[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."

6   During the interviews, my interlocutors described feelings of responsibility as shaping their ecological commitment. Indeed, they paid attention to the consequences of their actions on plural others - human and non-human, distant or nearby. Noé's example is striking:

> "[F]rom the moment you consume and exist... you can minimise and get closer to the best, but you can never get to zero... but everything you consume necessarily has very important ecological and social impacts behind it [...] I don't know, it's a kind of responsibility as an adult that everyone should have. [...] If I were a worker in a factory in Bangladesh, or a farmer in the South, or an animal in a farm, you know, I wouldn't want to go through that".

7   Similarly, Marie emphasised that her incoherence – the gap between her values and her practices – necessarily had impacts on others:

> "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."

8   The corollary of feelings of responsibility seems to be 'limiting ecological impact', a demand highly informed by the idea that we should live in harmony with these multiple others. Harmony is only attainable if each component of the ecosystem does not impinge on the living space of neighbours. For instance, Marion explained:

> "[T]o make sure that there is a real living together, we must necessarily manage to have limits and I have the impression that our society does not really have any [...] I think it's a form of respect for living human and non-human beings, to have limits and to say 'well my comfort can't be at the expense of the rest.'"

9   Now, I will discuss why the question of procreation falls into the same logic only to some extent. On the one hand, my interlocutors understood reproduction as something that increases people's environmental impacts. For instance, Thaïs asked: "[W]hat right do I have [...] for my personal happiness, and maybe for the potential happiness of a child, to put it out there when it's going to impact the lives of others?" Recalling the notion of 'carbon legacy', my interlocutors also imagined that they would be held accountable for their children's actions. Not only would their children in turn reproduce, but they would also participate in consumer society and would most probably adopt practices that my interlocutors consider 'wrong' – i.e. eating non-

human animals. As weird as it might sound, this is not so surprising. We often "both feel and be held responsible to varying degrees for actions by people under our care, dependents or children" (Laidlaw, 2010, 151). Indeed, the responsibility of an individual expands well beyond someone's intentionality (Ibid). Meanwhile, Odile mentioned: "I would not want to raise children in the hope that they would be absolutely like me and carry the same values". Simply put, she prefers not to have children than have some and force them to adopt a lifestyle that they have not chosen in order to reduce Odile's feelings of responsibility.

10 On the other hand, none of my interlocutors hold parents responsible for climate change. Thaïs exclaimed during the interview: "I don't think you have to not have kids to be green, I really don't!" Furthermore, Emile explicitly rejected overpopulation discourses based on the observation that they articulate an individualistic logic, far from opposing the systematic and capitalist origins of environmental destruction. Similar to consumption practices, we cannot ask people with different social, economic, and cultural capital to adopt the same reproductive choices. Perception of reproduction is filled with subjectivities, and specific social groups – such as Black communities – assign very different meanings to it. More broadly, Emile, Antoine and Adrien rejected the idea that individual practices will make a difference. Not only should we hold companies responsible, but the context highly impedes the scope of individual action. For instance, Antoine recognised: "[I]t's tricky because just by living in Switzerland you're responsible for a lot of things without necessarily wanting to [...] but I mean, beyond certain things I can't really go any further."

11 If none of them hold parents responsible, some of my interlocutors nonetheless expressed 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 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 the thing, it's... it's more about the method of production and delivery and generalised consumption that we have to change."

12 Gaspard offered a position close to that of Thomas. Of course, the problem has to be attributed to the rich and powerful people of this world. Nonetheless, people have a responsibility to refuse to some extent the existing system. At least, it is essential not to legitimise it through consumption or discourses based on relative comparisons such as 'the situation is worse elsewhere'. Julie defended a similar perspective, though her understanding of individual responsibility was stricter. Because governments are not taking measures, individuals should make changes in their lives: "So we don't have the choice anymore. As long as we're living in a capitalist world, to do what we can ourselves to uh [...] yeah, live a lifestyle that is more [...] respectful of the living."

13 When we analyse reproductive ethics in relation to global environmental changes, the notion of responsibility is also directed towards children yet to come, or the 'future' broadly understood. Indeed, climate ethicists argue that the relationship between the environment and procreation encompasses an ethical dimension because it holds a strong stance towards posterity. Simply put, questions about what kind of future we want to create and what our responsibility is in creating good conditions for coming generations are particularly inescapable when we think of having children. Distancing

herself from the idea that planetary overload is what makes the individual responsible for their reproductive choices, Overall (2012, 202) completes her argument by saying that "we ought not to go on reproducing if we might somehow know that the future for members of our species will be unalterably bleak and unremittingly miserable." Following my interlocutors' greater emphasis on uncertainty, described in the previous chapter, this ethical demand is the one that most structured their discomfort towards having children amidst environmental crises.

14 "[W]hat is my responsibility to want to give life to someone who is going to struggle and who is potentially not going to have really nice opportunities?" asked Marion. The words 'unreasonable', 'irresponsible', and 'unjust' were often used to describe the decision to have children amidst uncertainty. As highlighted by Val, knowledge about potential inhabitable futures is what makes her feel responsible:

> "[T]o have a child and to deliver that world to him or her, I wouldn't be comfortable with that, because I would find it selfish to say to myself actually I knew that these weren't conditions that allow [...] an education and fulfilment that are sufficient".

15 In a way, my interlocutors' views challenge Stephen M. Gardiner's (2011, 45–48) description of what he calls a state of "moral corruption". According to him, we are in such a state because we are unable to properly imagine and care for not-yet individuals. In other words, we fail to adopt strong measures against climate change because of the absence of the object of our moral concern – namely, future generations. To him, the pathway through this "tyranny of the contemporary" (Ibid, 154) should be informed by the "precautionary principle" according to which no action should be taken when it implies any kind of harm. Simply put, even in a situation of scientific uncertainty, there is no ethical justification for the threatening of any future forms of life. This principle generally informs my interlocutors' ethical demands and Marie explicitly mentioned it when she described her feelings of responsibility:

> "You don't know, you don't do it. [...] And I think that in the fact of not having children there is a bit of that... in fact yes maybe it will be ok... but maybe it will not be ok and, in doubt, I don't put a life in danger".

16 Overall, the fact that my interlocutors feel responsible for having children in the anticipation of dark futures significantly challenges the idea that they are individualistic people who, driven by abstract moral reasoning, believe they can save the world by opting out of parenthood. Instead, feelings of responsibility are entangled with care and love for future generations – either biologically linked to my interlocutors or not. As noted by Dow (2016, 19–20), "in people's everyday lives, ethics is not so much about abstract moral reasoning but about taking other perspectives into account and considering how any decision affects all those involved." Nevertheless, if her research participants found in nature protection projects the strength to secure a future 'stable environment' to have children, my interlocutors underscore that care for future children now merely prevents them from having babies.

17 Emphasising that care and the everyday are involved in feelings of responsibility leads to discussion of the ethical location of 'environmental childlessness'. Undoubtedly, sudden awareness about the environmental situation largely corresponds to an 'ethical moment' that is resolved by adjusting behaviours to reduce feelings of responsibility – a process informed by somewhat distant moral rules. For instance, Odile explained that, at first, she adopted pro-environmental habits based on prescriptive rules that felt constraining. Several others expressed guilt when it came to the inability to adopt profoundly sustainable lifestyles. Nonetheless, constraints progressively become part

of a broader desire to live differently, and pro-environmental behaviours are no longer experienced as sacrifices. This process translates the weaving of rather distant and prescriptive moral rules into the everyday care for others. Therefore, if what my interlocutors often referred to as "ecological awareness"[3] is well captured by Zigon's notion of "moral breakdowns", the decision not to have children sometimes subscribes to such a previous change in the ethos. Hence, highly informed by the necessity to maintain ecological practices generated by the prior 'ethical moment', childlessness is entangled into the everyday. Indeed, for some of my interlocutors, not having children is fully part of their worldview and does not generate dilemmas any more.

18   As a consequence, their attribution of responsibility to parents is somehow more robust. For instance, Emile reflected on why they navigated these parenthood questions amidst uncertainty in Manichean terms and explained that they could do so because they are sure that they would not have children. Differently, those who expressed that they currently experience a dilemma nuanced the distribution of responsibility. As they have not yet taken a decision, they constantly experience tensions and redefine how they can make sense of their personal decisions. For instance, Thaïs explained that she still retains the choice to have children and only has to weigh up what she could offer them. Simply put, there remains a possibility that she could redefine her responsibility if she ends up deciding to have children. Louis, recounting how he publicly portrays his reproductive hesitations, explained how he tries to convey the idea that no choice is better than the alternative: "[J]ust to say that it's a bit of a personal choice that… that doesn't put any more value on another choice and besides I won't allow myself to do it because deep down I know that maybe one day I'll radically change my desire." His flexibility in distributing the burden of responsibility is linked to his indecision. One day, he could be in the position of having taken a decision that he would need to justify.

19   Even though the attribution of one's responsibility is a process of constant negotiation, my interlocutors tend to reinforce the "procreative norm" described in chapter 3. Following this norm, having children is a conscious choice that future parents should make when their situation is the most favourable. Amidst environmental crises, the notion of "procreative norm" goes beyond expectations about the family environment to refer to global environment changes (see Dow, 2016). Indeed, it is untangled in anticipation of environmental futures. Since research has demonstrated that anticipation occurs within a particular moral horizon (see Hastrup, 2018), reproduction is informed by new ethical demands coalesced by such changes. Reflecting on her research participants' concerns about the future, Dow (2016) demonstrated that 'nature' is what provided guidance in discerning what were the ethical limits not to be crossed – i.e. procreation should remain 'natural'. Similarly looking for ethical limits, my interlocutors' relationships to the future of reproduction nonetheless differ from those of Dow's research participants. According to my interlocutors, favourable conditions will probably never be met in the current context. As exposed in the previous chapter, their political views underscore a profound disbelief in large-scale change. Thus, environmental and political circumstances provide ethical limits to their reproductive choices in a more radical way than for the inhabitants of Spey Bay. As we will discuss in the coming section, respecting such limits is a way to reach the 'good' life as it minimises feelings of responsibility.

5.2 Going beyond Responsibility: Recreating Meaning Amidst Crises

20 The feelings of responsibility discussed in the previous section fall within the larger scope of 'virtue ethics' – i.e. the work of cultivating virtues to be a 'good' person and reach individual and collective aspirations toward a 'meaningful' existence. The kinds of moral judgements my interlocutors addressed to themselves and others could be interpreted as being at play in a *courtroom* – following Judith Butler's conception of morality in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). According to Butler: "We start to give an account [of ourselves] only because we are interpellated as beings who are rendered accountable by a system of justice and punishment" (Ibid, 10). That we become subjects because we must defend ourselves sometimes translates into how we constantly judge others – and feel judged – when it comes to ecological practices. Several of my interlocutors concisely discussed these dynamics and how they can negatively impact the attractiveness of the ecological movement. Indeed, the prescription of coherence – i.e. if you call yourself 'green' you must be vegetarian otherwise you may be charged with hypocrisy – often undermines people's propensity to adopt ecological behaviours since they cannot adopt the 'full package'.

21 However, if feelings of responsibility are somehow entangled with how we present ourselves to others – particularly when we fear reprobation – I suggest that they also express deeply anchored self-ideals. This section discusses how these self-ideals emerge in relation to the necessity to live a 'meaningful' life. Living the Aristotelian fulfilled life, *eudaimonia*, means having the power to construct a life that one values (Fischer, 2014, 2). It echoes the ideas of 'life satisfaction' and 'well-being', which are irrevocably morally laden as they articulate ideas about value, worth, virtue, what is good or bad (Ibid, 4-5). Part of 'living a life that one values' is grounded in the alignment between actions and values. My interlocutors' accounts of responsibility towards distant and nearby others, and the necessity of limiting their environmental impact as much as possible indicate that they are engaged in such a realignment. Although they were aware that individual behaviours would not solve environmental problems, their everyday commitment to change habits and life projections reveal that ecological practices and values entered their ethos. To illustrate this, Thaïs reflected:

> "It's [silly] but a water bottle you can either buy it at IKEA which is the world giant of deforestation ... pfouaah... of the precariousness of a large part of the population through poorly paid work [...] or you can buy it from [an artisan] who hand-blows them in glass in Lausanne, you know? In every product I find that it takes a lot of energy to have an ecological conscience because you think about everything you buy."

22 This is not specific to my interlocutors. As noted by Cross (2019, 16), "[j]ust as life with climate change is creating new anxieties and compulsions, so too it is creating new ethical elisions, horizons and commitments." For instance, these new ethical commitments have entered the mundane supermarket, as Fischer's (2014) ethnographic case of German eggs reveals. He observed that a majority of the shoppers of the Südstadt neighbourhood in Hanover said that "they buy organic and free range eggs because they support ideas of environmental stewardship, social solidarity, and the common good" (Ibid, 43). Nonetheless, when my interlocutors express that having children raises a dilemma, they push further this quest for coherence and integrity.

23 To understand why, it is crucial to underline that environmental crises and uncertainty threaten the 'good' life. Kari Marie Norgaard's (2011; 2014) research on denial exemplifies how environmental crises might endanger the possibility of living a 'meaningful' life and the avoidance strategies that people mobilise to maintain their ways of living. Inspired by comparison with indigenous experiences of radical loss during the colonisation of the Americas, the climate ethicist Byron Williston (2012) discusses how collapse and our inability to secure many of the thick cultural materials we cherish threaten human flourishing. In a state of crisis, our attention is riveted on the present and we are stuck in "panic-mode". This mode prevents us from properly appreciating moral reasons, namely "to properly weigh them against competing reasons and, where appropriate, to know how to translate them into action" (Ibid, 175). Therefore, in the absence of reflexive space, we will become more and more guided by the perception of threat and emergency.

24 Beyond that sense of emergency and based on my interlocutors' stories, I would add that all available paths offer little consolation. Climate change generates anxiety, but the larger system prevents most of my interlocutors from finding concrete solutions in order to create meaning. As Gaspard described, there is absolutely nothing that leads us to believe that it will become brighter. Systemic destruction is everywhere. More precisely, I would like to recount the story of Marie, who voiced the impasse she has reached when it comes to making life choices amidst a system of which she profoundly disapproves:

> "Typically, I have a job, well I hate it [...] in fact I don't agree with a lot of things I do, but when I want to go towards another option, it doesn't exist yet, the one that would suit me. And so that's the question of what you do with this information: do you fight to create the environment in which you would be ok to live and [you fight] for your work environment to change, and for your home environment to change and... well you know?"

25 This example illustrates that once people engage in a radical critique of our capitalist, patriarchal, and ecocidal system, the possibility of finding a job and a lifestyle that allows them to align actions and political aspirations becomes compromised. Meanwhile, everything pushes them to adopt a certain type of life, and it is very demanding to find radical alternatives. It requires a kind of revolutionary character, but Marie, for instance, has not been endowed with such a temperament. She is introverted and it costs her a lot to go against the established order. Buying a water bottle led Thaïs to question all the practices that make her uncomfortable to finally question, similarly to Marie, what role she wants to occupy in society. Reluctant to fully opt out of society, she explained: "I find it very difficult to solve because there's this thing where... well what do you really put in place to make your lifestyle green but still be a part of society[?]"

26 According to Williston (2012, 175), the only alternative we have to overcome our state of numbness in times of crisis is to "strive hopefully to retain the ability to flourish as moral agents". According to the Greeks, properly weighing moral reasons is precisely what secures the possibility of living a 'meaningful' life. Therefore, if "[i]ndividual apathy is a rational response if there is nowhere to turn" (Norgaard, 2011, 225), the realignment between actions and values is the hopeful solution. This largely recalls the idea that spaces of uncertainty are particular moments of changeover during which people take the time to reflect on their life and reconstruct a new moral identity from their multiple past identities (see Kleinman, 2006; Humphrey, 2008). Therefore, the

ability to find meaning is entangled in my interlocutors' self-ideals and this is where the realignment between actions and values appears as a 'strategy' to attain the 'meaningful' life.

27   For instance, Marie described coherence as "a way to find peace". Indeed, as discussed in the previous section, my interlocutors progressively embodied constraining rules dictated by ecological utopias in the everyday, and these are not seen as sacrifices any more. This is precisely because these values and practices have entered their imaginings of what a 'good' person is. For my interlocutors, it appears that a significant part of being a 'good' person has to do with being a 'good' activist. Indeed, it cannot be detached from larger considerations about how to translate social change into one's private life. Therefore, it is not surprising that they regularly explained that it feels natural to align individual behaviours with collective aspirations. To say that it is natural does not mean that it is easy. Quite the opposite, my interlocutors mentioned how they sometimes wished to escape these moral obligations and find quiet. What counts, it appears, is the feeling of having at least tried to realign, to the limits of one's capacity. Thaïs nicely described:

> "I find that after a while it's insoluble [...] so I also have this thing where I'd like to find a way to... to manage my ecological awareness with a little more gentleness towards myself, a little less perfectionism, but also especially something where I can find myself, you know, where I say to myself, 'well, I made the best choice in this situation, and there you have it, I'm going in the best direction for me'... and it's also maybe in this way that it's interesting for me to say to myself 'well no, I'm not going to start a family.'"

28   In this regard, the decision not to have children takes on a different signification. It is a relief to take this decision as it leads her to build her life within the limits of what she is able to do without feeling responsible for potential harm to the environment and her future children. It becomes precisely what allows Thaïs to alleviate guilt and to remain a moral agent. Similarly, when Louis mentioned that he saw parenthood as a resignation, a way of turning his back on the values he believes in, he emphasised childlessness as a way to realign his values and actions. Furthermore, Odile expressed a similar sense of alleviation to Thaïs. Reflecting on the fact that her brother also went through a sort of 'meaning crisis', she was surprised when he told her that having a baby would give him a sense of purpose. For her, the situation is the exact opposite:

> "me on the other hand... it would accentuate the fact that this world doesn't make that much sense... I'll see my kids every morning and I'll be like 'oh my god, this doesn't make any sense'... Whereas right now, [not] having any makes a lot of sense to me."

29   Later, she added: "I think I'm freeing myself from a lot of things by not having children because I have too many questions!" This perspective largely recalls the words of Val exposed in the previous chapter when she explained how childlessness is a way to mitigate uncertainty and to find quietude. Therefore, my interlocutors' negotiations of ethical demands are inseparable from their larger perception of crises and uncertainty. If the inability to live in permanent "moral breakdown" is the fundamental motive for responding to the ethical demand (Zigon, 2007), not having children is the way some of my interlocutors found to respond to such a demand.

30   Finally, different accounts demonstrate how not having children opens up possibilities, beyond the mere fact that it is a source of peace. For instance, Julie, Marie, and Noé described how childlessness would allow them to be present for those already alive. A

lot of people already suffer on Earth, and it is meaningless to generate new needs. Their energy is more usefully invested in caring for various forms of life than focusing on the restricted family cell. Following the same logic, Julie referred to this reorientation of her energy explaining how she adopts practices that allow her to 'stay in the present': "I really try to stay in the moment because I think there will be plenty of time to worry [when the time comes]." In this regard, practical activities directed at the present make much more sense to her. Emile also explained that not having children opens up the possibility of imagining radically different futures and not succumbing to the illusion that their parents' life is still a realistic pathway. Firmly asserting that they would not subscribe to the nuclear family mandate pushes them to find the people with whom they would start a community and re-engage with a 'meaningful' future. In this regard, childlessness recalls Mattingly's (2014, 15) trope of "moral laboratories" as it opens up spaces of possibility, "ones that create experiences that are also experiments in how life might or should be lived."

31 To conclude this section, opting out of parenthood is not necessarily a pessimistic renouncement in the face of catastrophe, nor the answer to a moral judgment. Instead, this is a way for people to re-engage with the future, find ways of living that do not constantly recall the lack of meaning, and find the strength to live their utopias. While it is tempting to assume that such a strategy is an individualistic way to find peace, we should recall that "[t]he good life is presumed to be lived in and with community and directed to ideals that encompass collective goods" (Mattingly, 2014, 10). Undoubtedly, most of my interlocutors' political utopias were essentially collective.

NOTES

1. Original title in French: "Lettre ouverte à celles qui ne veulent pas (encore) d'enfant"
2. Original quote in French: "L'écologie, pour moi, c'est le renoncement. Et le renoncement le plus marquant, c'est de ne pas avoir d'enfant."
3. In French, the phrase is "prise de conscience écologique".

6. Mobilising the Environmental Motive

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1 While research in the 1970s described intense stigmatisation of voluntarily childless people, it has changed slightly since then. For instance, a quantitative study of university students' perceptions of parents and childless couples showed persistent negative stereotypes of the childless along with negative perceptions of parenthood when it comes to stress and marital strains (Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2018). Nonetheless, following the pronatalist context described in chapter 3, normative heterosexual gender roles and family expectations continue to constitute a discriminatory register against those who choose different pathways. As noted by Morison et al. (2016, 186), "it is precisely because their reproductive status is interpreted as a wilful deviation from the norm that childfree people are open to stigma". Indeed, it has been observed that those who are voluntarily childless face greater stigma than those who are involuntarily childless (Veevers 1980). In other words, it is the absence of desire for having children that is stigmatised rather than the absence of children itself. In this regard, being childless is an ambiguous social status as the uncertainty over the intention protects the voluntarily childless (Park, 2002, 32). Because of such uncertainty, the voluntarily childless may be responded to with sympathy or silence rather than disapproval (Ibid). However, this ambiguity does not prevent people from assuming that people desire children and repeatedly materialising these expectations during social interactions. This chapter discusses how my interlocutors dealt with social pressure and attempts to overcome the idea according to which the environmental motive would be a 'stigma management strategy'.

6.1 'So, when is the baby coming?': Dealing with Social Pressure

2 My interlocutors often referred to social interactions that assign them to specific gender roles. Reflecting on the fact that motherhood is understood as a women's project – when for men it is work – Val denounced the fact that people ask her how many children and when is the time rather than 'do you want children?' People assume

that she desires motherhood and the main response she gets is the traditional: "But you will change your mind". Every time, she is surprised by how quickly the topic of children comes up with strangers even though such questions are quite intrusive. Although women in the group explained that they felt assigned to a specific role, men also underlined the existence of social pressure to start a family. Thomas recounted:

> "there's the 'you say that, but you'll see', there's the 'are you sure you won't regret it later when you're old' uh... or like 'oh but you shouldn't say that, but you'll see, you'll change your mind' or 'yeah but [children] are only about happiness', etc."

3   Voluntarily childless people navigate social pressure by adopting different strategies. While the terminology sometimes differs from one piece of research to another, the highlighted strategies are the same and can be classified into two broad categories: the rejection or acceptance of difference (see Veevers 1975; Morison et al., 2016; Matthews and Desjardins, 2016). Due to its comprehensive view of the different strategies, I decided to focus on the work of Kristin Park to offer an account of my interlocutors' experiences. Drawing on Goffman's (1963; 1975) work on stigma, Park (2002) distinguished different ways through which childfree individuals control the information they provide to others (passing, identity substitution), justify their choice (condemnation of the condemners, self-fulfilment, or appeal to biological drives) or redefine the situation.

4   First and foremost, it is essential to note that most of my interlocutors recounted that they seldom publicly display their decision and interrogations about parenthood. With the exception of Val and Marion, who conveyed that they like to provoke debate, others said that they had discussions about parenthood mainly with people by whom they would most likely be understood. Most families had accepted my interlocutors' decision and were understanding. In this regard, Julie is the exception. She told me that she would never tell her mother that she decided to undergo sterilisation. Although she has not told her mother about sterilisation and the irreversibility of her choice, Julie recognised that her mother probably knew that motherhood was not a priority in her life. This is a great example of information control through "passing" – i.e. when young people say that they do not want to have children *now* or do not feel ready *yet*. Another good illustration is the case of Louis. He explained that the kind of reasons he would mobilise depend on his interlocutor. Sometimes he mentions the political reasons behind his childlessness, and sometimes he does not:

> "[Sometimes I say] 'yeah, actually I don't want to', 'I don't have the time', 'I don't feel like committing myself too much', and sometimes I tone it down a bit by saying 'no, but I'd like to'... but yeah, of course, it depends, I don't allow myself to say things that might be offensive to people if I know they're not ready to hear that kind of thing."

5   Alongside "passing", "identity substitution" refers to "presenting a stigmatised failing as another less stigmatized attribute" (Park, 2002, 33) – i.e. mentioning infertility or drawing attention away by focusing on marriage. A recurring component of my interlocutors' stories was that their childlessness is part of a larger package that generally makes it implicit that they do not necessarily want children. As we have seen, most of them have already opted out of the traditional 'job, partner, cohabitation, marriage' pathway. The way Odile presented it as a strategy is particularly enlightening:

> "[I]n order not to be stigmatised, I had to get out of everything. That is to say, I dress as if I were years younger [...] I go out with these people who are a little bit

younger [...] now it would seem strange to people to ask me why I don't want children, they can see in my life why I don't want [...] so I have protected myself a little bit from that by adapting my lifestyle so that it is obvious that it is not a question that has to be asked... and people don't ask it so much."

6   Voluntarily childless people are often asked why they do not want children and face the so-called "burden of proof" (Overall, 2012, 3). From what my interlocutors told me, they either expose their feminist and ecological motives or evade the question by saying 'I'm not interested in starting a family'. While Morison et al. (2016) distinguished between people who mobilise choice or escape it to minimise stigmatisation, my interlocutors generally referred to both when recounting their interactions. Indeed, they would say for example 'I do not want children, I do not find it appealing, and it is my choice'. Thus, what seemed more decisive was the distinction between the 'elaborated line of argumentation' and discourses articulated around the tropes of choice and desire. As we have seen with Louis' example, this greatly depends on how much their interlocutors might understand the different arguments. Some of my interlocutors recounted the tensions at stake during such demonstrations of their motives. Thaïs reflected:

> "In fact, it's as if you were telling [the parents] that they were bad people and that they had made the wrong choice... and that I find violent to do... and at the same time I find it violent not to be able to say why you decided not to do that... knowing that they really think you're... in general, people find that a little strange."

7   The demand for justification emerges from Thaïs' feeling of being misunderstood. The impossibility of defending her own choice without embodying a position of superiority appeared in other interviews. Recalling the previous research of Veevers (1972), Park (2002, 25) argues that "parents find the voluntarily childless threatening as their lifestyle challenges parents' sense of distributive justice, their convictions that the rewards of their choice offset the sacrifices and that marriage and children are the best routes to personal happiness." Denouncing these dynamics, Louis complained: "In fact, you just want to say 'well, can't we just accept it?' I don't give a shit about what you do, so let it be reciprocal!"

8   Having presented these examples, it is not surprising that my interlocutors constructed some of their rhetoric in response to reactions they often receive. Park called this way of justifying one's decision "condemnation of the condemners". The most typical example, also mentioned in Park's article, is the selfish-altruist debate. Namely, with regard to the idea that childfree people are selfish because they have chosen to fulfil their lives without returning the life that was given to them, Park underscores examples of people who explain that having children may also be a selfish act – i.e. because one fears loneliness or wishes to reproduce a new version of oneself. Furthermore, as observed by Veevers (1975, 486): "The accelerating impact of population pressures has begun to shift the burden of proof away from questioning the rights of persons to remain childless to questioning the rights of persons to procreate." Therefore, in a context where my interlocutors anticipate dark futures, the question of selfishness becomes even more present since my interlocutors negatively perceive the future. As displayed by Emile: "[T]o me if there's the ability and the tools to make the connection between what's going on in the world and what it means for the life of the child you want to bring into the world... then there's a fundamental selfishness in making the decision to do it anyway." Val asserted: "I don't think [it's selfish not to have a child] *because* (emphasis added) it's for climate considerations."

9 Another key argument in "condemning the condemners" is the rhetoric according to which parents have children without necessarily thinking about it, recalling the requirements of the "procreative norm". If we remember the solid ethical take of my interlocutors, they unsurprisingly conform to the image of the reflexive individual who has closely thought about the consequences of their decision. Even the validity of 'desire' as a sufficient explanation for having children is challenged. For instance, Noé stated:

> "[F]or me [having children] is a pleasure that is justified, that is there, and that should not be denied, but I just can't. [...] it's just that there's an economic, environmental, moral context that means you can't just say to yourself 'I want to, so I'm doing it!' And I have the impression that this is a bit the problem with people... it's a bit 'oh yeah we wanted a child, so we made one.'"

10 Differently, Marion argued that parents should stick to 'desire' to explain their decision to have children rather than looking for rational explanations. For instance, an inescapable argument on the parents' side is that all ecologists should not stop having children. A great majority of my interlocutors have been confronted with that narrative and were opposed to it. More precisely, Marion thought that it was a classist argument that reproduces the mandate according to which some lives are worthier than others.

11 While some of my interlocutors articulated narratives that characterise parents as selfish or irresponsible to varying degrees, I also found several examples that contradict the idea that they "condemn the condemners [to] take on the morally superior identity of reflexive decision makers" (Park, 2002, 35). For example, even though his last quote suggests that he performs such superiority, Noé mentioned several times throughout the interview that his environmental awareness is only the result of a succession of random experiences – i.e. a particular encounter, cleaning up a forest. According to him, he could have been a completely different person and he could have relates to his environment in very different ways if he had not been through these moments. Furthermore, he explained that it is important to remember 'where you are coming from' in order to find the arguments to convince people of the necessity to change some of their habits. Marion also explained that she realised how much her perspective on children could be violent for her close friends who have decided to start a family. Overall, my interlocutors were tired of justifying and preferred to limit their public accounts to a narrative of 'desire' rather than perform a somehow superior moral identity. Such limitation results from both a willingness to get rid of "the burden of proof", and to avoid hurting their friends. They also mentioned that their social circles had significantly changed in response to their friends' misunderstanding and divergent interests.

6.2 Looking for an Excuse?

12 As I have exposed so far, reproductive decisions are complex sites of negotiation of social norms and identity amidst a pronatalist and discriminative context. Therefore, it is helpful to approach the environmental motive in relation to this context. Building upon the great emphasis on 'stigma management strategies' briefly exposed in the previous section, one of the first reactions to 'environmental childlessness' activates the idea that voluntarily childless people are looking for an excuse or justification. During an interview, Edith Vallée, a French psychologist who specialises in childfree

people, foregrounded the hypothesis that ecology is socially more accepted than the desire to be childfree (Rambal, 2016). In her review of 47 studies on childless people, Houseknecht (1982, 378) advanced the same idea to explain why females were much more likely than males to express concern about population growth. Because the rejection of motherhood is associated with more severe sanctioning, women might provide a greater effort toward legitimisation. This greater effort manifested in my group of interlocutors as people belonging to gender minorities tended to offer more detailed accounts than men. When the former multiplied the arguments, most men – except Louis – focused on the environmental dimension.

13   Because the majority of my interlocutors did not call parenthood into question exclusively based on environmental considerations, it is possible that they progressively found a convincing argument in the environmental discourse. Indeed, I emphasised earlier that my interlocutors framed the environmental motive as a rational explanation that underlies hardly tangible sensations and desires. From this perspective, the environmental motive is almost 'instrumentalised' to explain voluntary childlessness. For instance, Val explained that when she started explaining her decision to her mother using the environmental motive, she was taken more seriously: "[I]t's not just that it annoys me when I see a child crying, it's really more thought through than that, and it goes deeper [...] and yeah when really I put out more arguments [...] I think it shook her up a little bit". Additionally, the ethical take of my interlocutors made them sound distant and almost 'calculative'. However, it is useful to distinguish 'finding an excuse' from 'developing awareness about the environmental situation'. 'Finding an excuse' underscores the idea that my interlocutors actively looked for a justification – similarly to the notion of "stigma management strategies". However, in what follows I expose why their experiences tend to dismiss this line of argumentation. Indeed, it is unlikely that they would take the time to develop well-constructed narratives and tell me of their experience if it was not anchored in fundamental considerations about the environmental and social climate in which we live. Moreover, that my interlocutors did not change their narratives during the collective discussion also reveals that they are consistent and confident in their positions.

14   Firstly, not only do my interlocutors limit the public display of their interrogations, but the environmental dimension does not present a particular advantage. While Val seemed to recognise the advantage of offering a detailed explanation to her mother, she also recounted how she sometimes avoids disclosing such arguments to strangers:

> "I'm already categorised as a vegetarian, activist [...] feminist, because I'm in the women's strike collective (haha). So sometimes I already have so many labels that I say to myself 'well, come on, I'm not specifying that' when of course I would want to... well I'm not ashamed of it and I think it's good to tell people that climatically having kids is maybe not ideal."

15   Alix similarly recounted that her family probably stuck to the fact that she does not desire children rather than the environmental motive. This is the case because, according to her, it is harder to defend: "[T]here are more attacks when you say 'yeah I think we're too many on Earth, I don't want kids' than when you say 'oh I just don't want kids.'" These accounts recall the disapproving and mocking tone of some press articles mentioned in chapter 4 and some reactions I myself received when presenting my research topic.

16 Secondly, whereas my interlocutors controlled the information they provided during social encounters, they do not hide the fact that children do not necessarily move them in order to perform a superior moral position. As mentioned in the last section, they expressed that they were tired of occupying this position. As a precise example, Val explained that most of the time she starts with the idea that the future is too dark. And then, she is not ashamed to add:

> "Of course, I would also add that it has never been a dream, that I have never planned to have a stroller, that I have never played with dolls, in other words, little things that underline that I don't have that maternal streak, so I don't have the impression that I'm giving up on anything either."

17 Thirdly, if the environmental motive does not present an advantage in justifying childlessness, Antoine confirmed that, in fact, the reverse was true. Calling parenthood into question appears as a powerful argument to raise awareness about climate change. If the case of Antoine is special since he has always wanted children, the symbolic power of parenthood has been mobilised by other actors as discussed in chapter 4. In this regard, more than an excuse, the environmental motive is a political tool of resistance.

18 Furthermore, as described throughout the whole dissertation, the environmental dimension behind childlessness is a complex assemblage of elements that my interlocutors embodied in various aspects of their lives. According to scholars who have tried to overcome "stigma management strategies" to explain why people perceive stigma but remain unperturbed by social pressure, voluntarily childless people evolve in a variant belief system (Veevers 1975; Matthews and Desjardins, 2016; Tillich, 2019). Assuming that the nuclear family is the norm, Matthews and Desjardins (2016) observe how voluntarily childless people attempt to find a place in the cultural meaning system wherein their status is understandable and acceptable (cultural realignment), or rethink cultural expectations and generate alternative categories of normalcy (cultural transcendence). For instance, Tillich (2019) looked at how sterilised women transform a body state that is considered 'deviant' into an empowering self-optimisation by recreating a new hierarchy of values within which procreation occupies the lowest rank. By re-crafting meaning systems, people also renegotiate their identity, the sense of 'who they are' and 'what is their purpose'. Indeed, central to such transformation is that these women affirm their singularity and uniqueness rather than asserting their deviance. By being outsiders – i.e. persons who do not fit normative social expectations – they become individuals (Ibid, 790).

19 The 'childfree' identity was not central to most of my interlocutors' narratives in the sense that they would not necessarily reclaim it, nor do they vehemently oppose parents. Similarly to Park's (2002, 23) research participants, it can be described as a 'background' identity that re-emerges as salient throughout the life course, through responses to others, or in the rehearsal of anticipated encounters. Nonetheless, I could grasp some 'identity dynamics' similar to those described above. For example, Marion explained that childlessness had become both a way of identification and a decision she wished to make 'normal':

> "I had a moment where I felt like it was defining me, you know? To tell myself 'I'm alone, I'm single, and I don't want to have children, and that's cool' you know [...] I claim it loud and clear that I don't want to have children, as if it was something I wanted to fit into the current norms, so stop bothering us with this question!"

20   Fitting Tillich's analysis, part of these identity processes is a desire to do things differently. In this regard, the example of Odile is striking. She confided: "[I]n fact by putting myself on the margin, I'll say, I'm... I'm protecting myself, I'm always remembering who I am... because I fall back too quickly [into the system]". To her, one thing that makes parenthood attractive is the possibility of proving to people that she could have children while being in polyamorous relationships and living in a community. Indeed, she expressed:

> "I like the fact of being outside the system and showing that you can still live in a nice way [...] It's stupid, but as I said before, I don't want to be like the masses... I also know that I like this thing of being a bit at the forefront on these issues."

21   Following her reflection about why the destructiveness of capitalism forces individuals to become more responsible, Julie also explained that making alternative lifestyles is what makes people's individualities:

> "I think it's also reaffirming a kind of independence because the individual is so... a little... crushed in this society, well we are all conformed, normalised, a little bit the same. [...] so in fact it's also a way to still exist in this system that erases all individuality."

22   With regard to these examples, more than an excuse, the environmental motive belongs to frames through which my interlocutors understand the world, their identities, and generate new meaning systems. We cannot separate their views about parenthood and family-making from their larger worldviews and ecological practices. In these re-crafted worlds, childlessness is attractive and parenthood is problematic for all the reasons developed so far. Key is the example of Antoine, who still hopes that he will have children at some point. Because the decision to have children progressively stands in contrast with his values and worldview, he somehow anticipated negative reactions coming from the 'environmental childlessness' point of view. Antoine negotiated his responsibility by openly saying that he *knows* that it is a selfish decision to have children amidst uncertain circumstances. By explicitly stating the selfishness of his choice, he secures his 'good' and reflexive activist identity. Regarding the role of identity-making processes in childlessness, it is central to remember that these dynamics result from a pronatalist context where the "burden of proof" still weighs on my interlocutors. Those who referred to identification processes or expressed more negative views towards family norms are those who also referred the most to social pressure.

23   Finally, I argue that we should consider the role of uncertainty because my interlocutors were trying to secure their decision rather than looking for a justification. As I exposed in chapters 4 and 5, some of them felt that not having children was a relief. Based on the work of Dow (2016), I mentioned earlier that they found in environmental crises a sort of ethical limit to their reproductive decisions. Not only was this the case because they were somehow going through an 'ethical moment', but because the general context of uncertainty probably reinforces the need to project toward the future, something that some felt unable to do. That my interlocutors accumulate explanations even though they are not necessarily exposing them to others suggests that they are first and foremost finding justification for themselves. Indeed, the trope of 'control' over one's life erupted several times. As I mentioned in the methodology, a few people were happy to receive the interview transcription to add them to their personal archives. At the same time, a significant part of the group told me that they were currently questioning themselves rather than asserting a firm

decision. To me, it sounds as if they were opening all possibilities so that they can more easily adapt to future circumstances. Such flexibility recalls the work of Johnson-Hanks (2005) who emphasised that we cannot approach reproductive intentions as planned action, particularly in contexts of great uncertainty. If they defended that people should reflect about why and how they have children, my interlocutors paradoxically remained open to the development of unexpected desires and changes in life cycles.

7. Conclusion

1 My interlocutors' pathways towards 'environmental childlessness' are multiple and it would be inappropriate to homogenise their experiences. Some of them never really wanted children, others only thought they would have a biological family until they seriously considered it, and a few of them wished they could have children. Women particularly emphasised that motherhood assigns them to a normative gendered identity and represents a heavy practical workload. Overall, following the greater attraction of childfree lifestyles, my interlocutors called the dominant pathway to adulthood into question and found childlessness profitable in the pursuit of greater autonomy and freedom. Nonetheless, although they were politicised to varying degrees, their interrogations are inscribed within a desire not to succumb to capitalist and consumerist ways of living that are quickly reproduced within the nuclear family cell. In other words, they do not look for self-fulfilment and optimisation, even though the language of 'control over one's life' erupted from time to time. The environmental dimension, the focus of this dissertation, also played a different role in my interlocutors' pathways towards childlessness. Some of them found in it a theoretical anchoring for not readily tangible sensations, the need for justification being explained both by the pronatalist "burden of proof" and the necessity to secure plans amidst uncertainty. Others were seriously unsettled when they realised that the future was not as bright as they imagined.

2 Despite this diversity of experiences and the impossibility of separating 'the environment' from other concerns, I have dissected the pathways towards 'environmental childlessness' into three main spheres: environmental concerns, ethical considerations, and persistent pronatalism. First, my interlocutors' concerns over parenthood and (im)possible futures are informed by their concerns for the environment. They became aware of and sensitive to the critical environmental situation through various means and, for the most part, aspired to social transformation and justice. Subscribing to the idea that westerners should generally limit their ecological footprint, they incorporated reproduction, to varying degrees, in the CO_2 matrix. More substantially, they anticipated dark futures when they observed that political institutions are not heading in the right direction but continue to foster economic growth, intrinsically linked to environmental degradation. Their concerns exemplify that environmental uncertainty seriously threatens people's ability to

project themselves into the future and highlight the necessity to overcome the 'psychologisation' of environmental concerns. Furthermore, the use of the word 'collapse' should be made possible without risking being relegated to reductive representations. Believing that life on Earth is threatened is not more irrational than believing that humanity will necessarily survive. Instead, these two positions belong to different meaning systems and cannot be approached following a right-wrong dichotomy.

3   Second, my interlocutors' concerns about both parenthood and environmental futures are embedded in ethical processes. Overall, they felt irresponsible to give birth while not knowing what their children's lives will look like. Furthermore, following the individualisation at stake in environmental movements, their concerns translated into feelings of responsibility towards distant and nearby others, human and non-human entities. In a way, their discourses articulate emerging ethical horizons, limits, and dilemmas intrinsic to the 'Anthropocene'. Nevertheless, it is reductive to imagine that my interlocutors understand their childlessness as a solution to climate change. While they have difficulty overcoming various feelings of responsibility and dilemmas, they do not think that their choice would make a practical difference. Capitalist production and systematic destruction are held responsible. Embedded in care, a quest for meaning also informs the pathway towards environmental childlessness. To alleviate guilt and create a life that one values, opting out of parenthood is a 'source of peace' as it opens up possibilities to create alternative ways of living that do not subscribe to the dominant trajectory.

4   Third, their pathways towards childlessness are fraught with social representations that underscore the centrality of family and the general dislike for 'écolos'. As delineated in chapters 3 and 6, my interlocutors' pathways are inseparable from pronatalist injunctions. In other words, even though the environmental situation is understood as highly problematic, they also rejected the gendered norms mobilised by the nuclear family. Part of the ethical work described in previous chapters is probably linked to a general context where two components of their identities are not unanimously socially accepted: childlessness and ecology. Indeed, they recounted the tensions that structure some of their social interactions and push them to sometimes adopt strategies to avoid discomfort. Nonetheless, the environmental dimension is more than an excuse for multiple reasons. Among the reasons developed, the need to secure life projects or open up all possible paths appears to mitigate uncertainty and 'stay in the present'.

5   I remember when people asked me at the beginning of this project about where and how to find the people I was interested in. Whereas I was obviously concerned by the potential difficulties I would encounter, 'recruitment' has been a surprisingly straightforward process. Nevertheless, it is essential to highlight why and the resulting limits. First and foremost, I could find my interlocutors because the criteria were significantly vague, thus making it harder to isolate the environmental dimension within the complex assemblage of reasons they expressed. While it is relevant to approach this diversity by stating that the environmental dimension is necessarily embedded in larger political considerations and utopias, future research could focus on people who renounced parenthood based primarily on environmental concerns.

6   Additionally, I could find my interlocutors because I had decided not to reach a particular population. If I had intended to represent a diversity of socio-economic

status, the 'recruitment' would have merely been a failure. Here again, it is possible to offer an analytical answer. Undoubtedly, my interlocutors' social positions confirm that the ways in which environmental concerns penetrate the reproductive sphere are highly socially situated – i.e. concern mostly white and educated people. My interlocutors' interrogations appear almost as a 'niche', as much as they convey a specific type of political beliefs. However, should I conclude that 'environmental childlessness' is a concern belonging just to a particular group of people? At first sight, it is widely accepted that reproduction does not mean the same across the social spectrum. Nevertheless, the scope of this research is too limited to address the question of extrapolation appropriately. Hence, further research is necessary to analyse the relevance of this topic in relation to various socio-economic statuses, cultural and racial belongings. Meanwhile, it is essential to highlight that my interlocutors were not as 'marginal' as it may sometimes appear throughout this dissertation. Some of them were engaged in long-term heterosexual relationships, had stable and socially rewarding jobs, or were active in mainstream politics.

7 In other words, even though 'environmental childlessness' is 'niche' to some extent, there are good reasons to believe that uncertainty will continue to increase and take a particular resonance in the coming years. I have demonstrated that the connection between reproduction and environmental depletion should retain scholars' attention despite its imbrication with neo-Malthusian thinking. As such, it is necessary to expand anthropological understanding of how environmental uncertainty affects the way people envision their lives, the future, and potential offspring in western societies. Undoubtedly, long-term research is needed to protect fundamental reproductive rights that some communities still fight for. As noted by Andrew S. Mathews (2020, 74): "A key feature of Anthropocene scholarship [...] is a reconsideration of our ethical and political relation to the future." I support this claim, and this dissertation offers a rich example of the interest and necessity of pursuing such investigation.

8 To conclude, I return to Donna Haraway, whose argument about non-biological, alternative, and plural kin has been a great source of inspiration and guidance. Without entering the complexity of her argument, I only want to reflect on the fact that my interlocutors teach us *one* way of "staying with the trouble". Returning to the opening quote of this dissertation, as their sense of 'meaningless' life and lost hope expressed, they are somehow trapped in conventional representations of hideous pasts and apocalyptic futures. On the other hand, since their relationship to the future is too painful and ambiguous, they give themselves the means to focus on the present, existing kin, and opportunities. They are not blindly hanging on to an illusionary continuity to imagine their lives, but recreate different ways of living despite the sometimes-bitter taste of living on a damaged planet. They push us to take distance from the idea that reproduction and future generations is what fosters the necessity to secure 'stable futures'. They invest in other spheres than the biological family and refer to care in a broader sense, attracted by co-parenting, adoption, relation to other species, and life-long activism. As is beautifully put by Weeks (2021, 6), they remind us that "[t]he point of the exercise is not to celebrate or condemn, but to imagine a future in which no one relational or household model is expected, privileged or over-invested with hope." Furthermore, as 'living with the trouble' and the re-emergence of life are possible only through symbiotic relationships, my interlocutors' utopias similarly embraced 'community' – as opposed to the nuclear family – as the most resilient path in times of climate change. Realigning their actions and values is a way to accept the

necessity to live otherwise without succumbing to excessive pessimism or optimism – namely, to do with the means at hand. It is not an individual journey through the pitfalls of personal development but a collective immersion of 'extraordinary' ethics into the 'ordinary', to escape guilt and find strength.

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Annex

Table 1. Participants

Study name, Age, Gender	Education/ professional activity	Relationship(s)	Activism/ Political Engagement	Decision Status
1/ Julie, 23 Female	Completed secondary education/ Educational support	Heterosexual relationship for 3 years	Activist for animal rights and volunteers in an animal sanctuary	Will undergo sterilisation (in the coming months)
2/ Val, 28 Female	BA in International Relations; MA in Public Administration/ Unemployed	Heterosexual relationship for 3 years	Member of the Green Party at municipal level	Considers sterilisation (in the coming years)
3/Marie, 27, Female	BA in Geography MA in Urban Planning/ Geographer-urban planner, permanent contract	Single	Member of an association that manages a sustainable grocery	Questioning
4/ Gaspard, 22 Male	Completed secondary education/ No paid employment (by choice)	Heterosexual relationship	Full time activist for animal rights and founder of an animal sanctuary	Vasectomised

5/ Louis, 30, Male	BA and MA in mathematics/ Secondary school mathematics teacher (40%)	Non-monogamous heterosexual relationships	Member of a teachers' network for the environment, gravitates in militant circles	Questioning
6/ Odile, 32, Female	MA in Art conservation, restauration/ Artistic collaborator (30%)	Non-monogamous heterosexual relationships	Member of a an association that promotes sustainability, cultural activities and community. Local Councillor, Solidarity-Ecology Party	Questioning
7/ Noé, 32 Male	BA in Computer Science/ Electronics delivery person	Single	Activist for animal rights	Confident ('I don't know what would change my mind')
8/Antoine, 25, Male	BA in sport science with a minor in Geography, MA in Urban Planning/ Trainee at the urban planning office of the State of Geneva	Heterosexual relationship for 6 years	Environmental activist (Extinction Rebellion)	Questioning
9/Adrien, 48, Male	Trained in plumbing and renewable energies/ Sanitary engineer for a design office that builds solar panels	Heterosexual relationship cohabitant for 8 years	Activist for animal rights	Confident
10/ Thaïs, 27, Female	BA in Geography and communication science with a minor in environmental science, MA in sustainability/ Assistant director of family planning (80%)	Heterosexual relationship for 10 years, cohabitant since 3 years	No political engagement	Confident ('I don't know what would change my mind'), considers sterilisation

11/ Alix, 28, Female	BA in Art History and Philosophy/ MA student and part-time worker in delivery service	Heterosexual relationship for 7 years, cohabitant since 1 year	No political engagement	Confident, ('I don't know what would change my mind')
12/ Marion, 33, Female	BA and MA in communication science/ Communication officer for a local currency	Single	Environmental activist (Alternatiba)	Questioning
13/ Emile, 21, Non-binary trans person (they/them)	BA student in History, Religion History, and Psychology	No information	Member of queer collectives, gravitates in militant circles	Confident
14/ Thomas, 31, Male	Assistant physician in pneumology (100%)	Single	Environmental activist (Grève pour l'Avenir)	Confident, ('I don't know what would change my mind')