



August 2022

## Challenging Scarcity

### Contribution to GTI Forum [The Population Debate Revisited](#)

Wendy Harcourt

I would like to join this intriguing GTI debate around population. I am concerned that we are in danger of sliding down the slippery slope of colonial and racialized reasoning if we do not question the assumption that scarcity is caused by overpopulation and environmental degradation. We need to shift from population to complex questions around property rights, labor obligations, and a governance of environmental resources that has led to global inequalities and scarcity. The problem lies not so much in scarcity itself but in how scarcity is socially generated: in other words, the problem of access is due to a range of complex historical and political conditions.<sup>1</sup> Betsy Hartmann, a well-known analyst of the implicit gender and racial blindness of population policy, puts it more strongly: “When this god of scarcity meets the devil of racism, the result is the greening of hate.”<sup>2</sup>

The renewed use of statistics in the climate debate risks providing ongoing justification for the control of racialized bodies in population policy. Giorgos Kallis, in his rereading of Malthus, argues that speaking of population in terms of numbers is racist, classist, and patriarchal.<sup>3</sup> The issue is not population but how all of us can learn to live within our limits to stop ecological and social destruction. We need new and diverse strategies to build decolonized, socially just futures.

As a feminist political ecologist, I would argue that our focus needs to be squarely on the lives of people on the margins whose environments are exploited and who are engaged in life and death battles.<sup>4</sup> “Birth and death” are not just about state and markets but about social processes and institutions which create communities and provide the social, economic, and ecological conditions that support human security and sustainability. The fight for reproductive justice is

not only about individual women's reproductive rights and freedom of choice, wherever they are living, but also about social, economic, civic, and environmental goals. Environmental issues are reproductive issues: "Efforts to protect the health and integrity of natural systems—water, air, soil, biodiversity—are struggles to sustain the ecosystems that make all life possible and enable the production and reproduction processes upon which all communities (human and non-human) depend. In other words, environmental struggles are about fighting for and ensuring social reproduction."<sup>5</sup>

These are not easy discussions. Population debates engage us on intensely emotional and personal levels. Deciding to have children when I did in the 1990s was about the feminist fight for the biological, technological, and economic choice to have children. That fight, twenty-five years later, is entangled in social and environmental responsibilities which diminish the possibility to speak of individual choice unaware of our collective responsibilities and fearful futures.

In conclusion, let me point to the provocation of Donna Haraway in her call for "making kin not babies."<sup>6</sup> She asks us to become responsible for those other than our biological family, forging relationships of dependence with people of all ages and with the more-than human beings with whom we also live. Haraway's idea of making kin is a deeply radical strategy for survival and a plea for multi-species reproductive justice.

## Endnotes

1. Lyla Mehta, ed., *The Limits to Scarcity: Contesting the Politics of Allocation* (New York: Earthscan, 2010).
2. Betsy Hartmann, "Population, Environment and Security: A New Trinity," in Jael Silliman and Ynitra King, eds., *Dangerous Intersections: Feminist Perspectives on Population, Environment*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2009), 1–23.
3. Giorgos Kallis, *Limits: Why Malthus Was Wrong and Why Environmentalists Should Care* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).
4. Wendy Harcourt, "Unravelling the 'P' Word in Environment and Development," *Development and Change* 51, no. 6 (2020): 1628–1639.
5. Giovanna Di Chiro, "Living Environmentalisms: Coalition Politics, Social Reproduction, and Environmental Justice," *Environmental Politics* 17, no. 2 (2008): 276–298.
6. Donna Haraway, "Making Kin in the Chthulucene: Reproducing Multispecies Justice," in *Making Kin not Population: Reconceiving Generations* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018), 67–100.

---

## About the Author



Wendy Harcourt is Professor of Gender, Diversity and Sustainable Development at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of the Erasmus University Rotterdam in The Netherlands. She joined ISS in November 2011 after twenty-three years working at the Society for International Development as editor of *Development* and programme director. She is series editor of the *Palgrave Gender, Development and Social Change* and the *ISS-Routledge Series on Gender, Development and Sexuality*. She has published widely on critical development, post development, body politics and feminist political ecology. Her latest book is the edited collection *Feminist Methodologies: Experiments, Collaborations and Reflections*.

---

## About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Wendy Harcourt, "Challenging Scarcity," contribution to GTI Forum "The Population Debate Revisited," *Great Transition Initiative* (August 2022), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/population-harcourt>.

---

## About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As a forum for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.