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Summary:

"Demodystopias in German scientific and mass-medial discourses of the beginning 21th century"

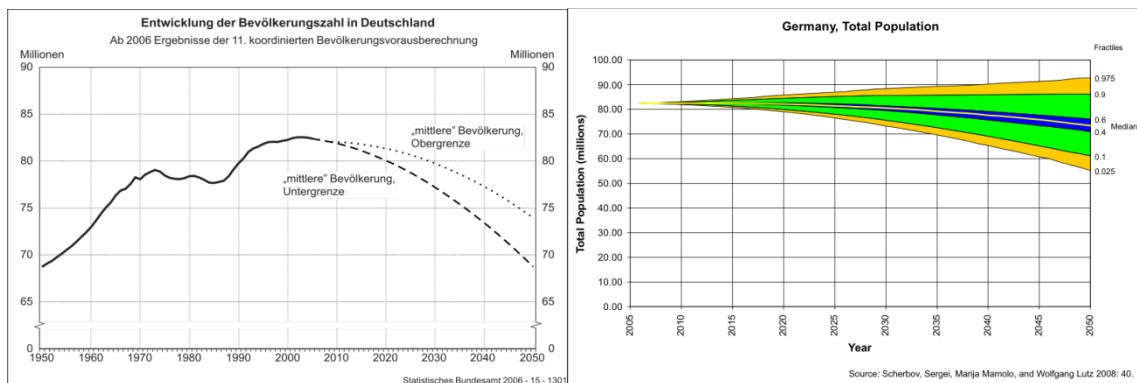
"Dystopias that are brought about by demographic change or that make population matters a salient concern I will call *demodystopias*." (Domingo 2008: 725)

In his examination of apocalyptical demographic discourses in the modern literature, the Spanish demographer Andreu Domingo (2008) has developed the term "demodystopias". It can be referred perfectly to the most topic-related publications in the German mass-media as well as to parts of the scientific discourse dealing with the topic of demographic change. Since the millennium, this has been signified with a negative or even apocalyptical meaning in the most European countries and especially in Germany. Basically, demographic change could previously be understood as alteration of the three main indicators fertility, mortality, and migration. In contrast to such a permanent fluctuation of population dynamics, the current meaning as aging of the population with the perspective of its shrinking aims on strictly expounding of problematic consequences of the demographic change in a basically uncertain future. Birth decline and expanding life-expectancy are considered as the triggers of this development. But in contrast to the suggestions of the mass-media, there is a variety of more reflected positions in demography, regardless of the fundamental dominance of this topic.

Concerning this matter there exist several different and partially antagonistic positions concerning its problematic implications on the society, their validity, and finally the question, whether demographic change in the current connotation is actually a problem or not. These positions are substantially different regarding the level of a critical self-reflection of methodical aspects of population projections and also their postulated consequences. While the mass-media mostly construct apocalyptical scenarios of the future according to the imperatives of scandalization, news-factors, and agenda-setting,

politicians oftentimes profit from apparently deterministic narratives for mediating the consequences of their bygone mistakes without any personal responsibility. In contrast to these discourses, the topic evokes a quite strong polarization in the academic field. “Apocalyptic” Demographers deduce normative and political implications and state in the extreme case of the meanwhile retired professor Herwig Birg in cooperation with the FAZ-editor Frank Schirmacher in the basic course of demography published in this newspaper that it would be “already 30 years after twelve”.

In contrast to such statements, the official publications of the German Statistical Office Destatis (2006) or Federal Institute for Population Research (2004) provide more moderate utterances. But regardless of the note of the model-character of the published population projections, it is oftentimes insisted on the deterministically deduced problematic consequences for the society. Moreover, it is obvious from a scientific view, that only the medium scenarios appear in the last (11th) coordinated population projection. (Statistisches Bundesamt 2006, see also Fig. 1) If the total bandwidth of all 15 scenarios of this deterministic projection would have been published graphically and in tables, a lot of the problematic consequences could only have been stated with strong reservation. In contrast, probabilistic population projections like the one below of the Vienna Institute of Demography are able to show the complete confidence interval of the future development according to the underlying assumptions. (Scherbov et. al. 2008, see also Fig. 2) Furthermore, the modified scales of the axes lead to a further dramatization of the visually mediated utterance of the last Destatis projection in contrast to the recent VID version:



Figures 1, 2: deterministic (Destatis 2006) vs. probabilistic population projections (Scherbov et. al. 2008)

In Conclusion, regardless of the used methods a population projection can only be as good as the underlying assumptions. Furthermore, the results are strongly

dependent on the census data base, which is especially in the reunified Germany quite questionable. Only after the new census in 2011 will it be more reliable. Consequently, the demographic views into the future are extremely controversial. (Hummel 2000, Bingler/ Bosbach 2004) Taking this into account, the recent brochure of the Rostocker Zentrum zur Erforschung des Demografischen Wandels (Tivig/ Hetze 2007) points out that demographic developments are also the result of socio-economic and political developments, which is oftentimes ignored in the mediation of population projections to the public. In contrast to such latent skepticism, another brochure which is edited by the neo-conservative Bertelsmann Foundation postulates demographic unity. According to this point of view, “all serious prognoses are equal in their fundamental tendency: The German population will decrease, the mean age will increase strongly, and the proportion of inhabitants with a migration background will noticeably rise.” (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2006: 4, translated by R.M.).

As described above, such an astonishing homogeneity seems neither realistic for a scientific discourse, nor would it be appropriate to identify one monolithic “Population-discourse”, like in the very few existing literature that approached the topic under reference to discourse analysis. (Hummel 2000, Etzemüller 2007) Consequently, a variety of different discourses needs to be analyzed, which led to the described shift in the meaning of demographic change in the last years. Population projections and their communication in the mass-media, interpretation and political instrumentalization play a crucial role in the framing of the hegemonial perception of this topic. The main aim of the related dissertation proposal is to reveal specific regimes of truth, which are focused on the manipulation of (social-)political attitudes of the public and decision-makers, as well as the conditions that lead to their genesis. In contrast to the claimed objectivity of the underlying empiricist determinism, the related discourses are strongly connected to specific power relations and political interests. For their examination, Foucault’s “toolbox” and the hegemony-theoretical perspective of Laclau/ Mouffe provide perspectives which can be productively modified in order to identify this highly important case of distorted communication. But both approaches of discourse analysis provide neither a fully developed theoretical paradigm, nor a specific method according to the intentions of the authors. An appropriate operationalization and specific modifications according to the topic will be the main challenge for a discourse analysis of demodystopias. Nevertheless, this challenge provides a certain philosophical ethos which fits into an undogmatic and pluralistic understanding of critical theory.

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