

Staying with the Sign

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Let's recall two origin stories of population and governance. M. Murphy's *Economization of Life* (2017) proceeds from the nineteenth century and Malthus's writing on overpopulation. Foucault's 1977–1978 Collège de France lectures published in English as *Security, Territory, Population* (2007) start from the physiocrats' writing on grain markets in the eighteenth century. For both, "population" is tied to the governance of life. Murphy's focus is on the transformation of populations into racialized, economized entities to be governed and managed. Foucault's focus is on the emergence of populations *as* a process of governance. For Murphy, overpopulation is the vehicle for the economization of life. For Foucault, the very idea of population is generated through the economization of life.

Murphy's analysis of "overpopulation" shows that it is always constituted through problematizations of the Global South. Policy concerns about environmental sustainability and security are always concerns about the who, where, and how of overpopulation. My own policy research, in health and human services, means I am more familiar with different problematizations—namely, the constitution of people as "populations" in the Global North. These are populations described in longitudinal cohort studies and statistical datasets of health, in articles in economics and policy journals: aging populations, urban populations, drug-using populations, unemployed, and at-risk populations. Such designations have effects: Creating people as belonging to a particular population creates them as statistically legible and objects of enumeration and surveillance. They become, as Ruha Benjamin (2018) notes in recognizing herself in this literature, populations as problems.

What does it mean when people are described as populations, rather than as people or communities? Foucault's lectures illustrate the co-constitutions of populations with economics, bio-informatics, and statistics, by reference to famines and grain markets, and to plagues and vaccines. These examples demonstrate that "populations" are distinct objects of concern, separate from "people," where the latter are pertinent only in their relation to the former. That is, creating populations is a way of organizing people into a relationship with a category. This categorizing then brings about new understandings of risk and hazard and has implications for government interventions. We can think here about the targeting of programs to those in "priority" or "vulnerable" populations; and administrative differentiations of illness from disability determining if people are "unemployed" or "not in the labor market," with implications for the welfare payments they receive and scrutiny to which they are subject (Hummell et al. 2025). We can also find contemporary instances of the constitution of new populations. COVID-19 in Australia, for example, brought into being new governance regimes through the category of "areas of concern," and so created postcode-based populations. Areas of concern made the people who lived in those areas subject to new rules, new scrutiny, new designations of hazard. A category of people were brought into being, and new subpopulations of COVID-19 risk and management were calculated (Pienaar et al. 2024).

COVID-19 also amplified social concerns about the connections between psychiatric distress and changing forms of technology and sociality. These connections have produced new categories of people, including the "anxious generation" (Davies 2025), part of the population most affected by the "loneliness epidemic," with needs demanding policy interventions, such as social media bans and new youth mental health agencies. At least some of these concerns are animated by statistical evidence pointing to apparent population decline in well-being and achievement over time, recalling earlier eugenic concerns about population health and degeneration (Meloni 2016).

All this suggests that the concept of population does some heavy lifting in creating and governing the worlds we have, and not just in its most familiar and undifferentiated use in discussing crisis ("overpopulation"). Derrida ([1967] 2005) famously wrote that we cannot do without the sign without also giving up critique. Population may be equally indispensable to our own critiques of policy problematizations.

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