

Population Decline as the Crisis of Capitalism: The Japanese Experience

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between capitalism and population decline, arguing that stable labor reproduction is essential for capitalism. Since neither the state nor capital can directly control reproductive decisions, declining birth rates in mature societies signal a crisis. Japan's population policies, particularly "Regional Revitalization" initiated in 2014, aimed to counteract declining birth rates by redistributing populations to rural areas. However, this approach has failed, as the concentration of population in Tokyo continues and the birthrate remains well below the replacement level. The paper warns that if capital ultimately seeks to subsume population reproduction, it could commodify human existence itself, threatening individual freedom.

Keywords

population decline; commodification of human beings; labor; capitalism; regional revitalization; Japan

1. Sense of crisis

The sense of crisis is always perceived in relation to uncontrollable phenomena external to capitalism, namely nature and humans. In the 19th century, based on Malthusian population theory, it was believed that humans could not escape poverty and vice, as the exponential population growth would surely outstrip the arithmetic increase in food supply. This situation, known as the Malthusian trap, was overcome by the increase in productivity of staple food through advancements in capitalistic agriculture. In the mid-20th century, concerns emerged that the accelerating expansion of human activities, driven by population growth,

might exceed the Earth's ecological capacity. The "Limits to Growth" report by the Club of Rome (Meadows et al. 1972) is well known in this context. However, the subsequent oil shock led to a reduction in fossil fuel consumption in developed societies. Additionally, being eco-friendly became a value-added trait, and environmental impacts such as CO₂ emissions turned into exchange value. By the late 20th century, concerns about the Earth's ecological capacity had temporarily alleviated.

However, upon entering the 21st century, these concerns have resurfaced. The term "Anthropocene" suggests that the increase in population and resource utilization has reached a geological turning point, creating irreversible

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environmental impacts (Curzen and Stoermer 2000). Against this backdrop, Neo-Malthusian arguments advocate population control, even at the expense of reproductive rights, to address global environmental problems (Ojeda et al. 2019).

David Harvey (2014) questions the notion that environmental crises are a threat to humans. Such views tend to attribute the cause of environmental crises to capitalism and argue for its revision or abolition to resolve these crises (e.g. Saito 2020). However, looking back on human history, it was the very development of capitalism that overcame environmental constraints and resolved the crises of humans repeatedly. The increase in productivity through the capitalistic transformation of agriculture and the commodification of environmental impacts are evidence of this. For Harvey (2014), the true crisis for humans is the development of capitalism itself. The inexorable progress of neoliberal capitalism intensifies exploitation, expropriation, and alienation, undermining humanity. Some scholars see signs of the end of capitalism in the pacing down of global economic growth (e.g. Mizuno 2014). However, Harvey (2014) argues that capitalism is such a robust system that it will not collapse on its own. Only through conscious, collective opposition can it be abolished and a new social system constructed.

However, I believe that the very humanity, seemingly powerless before resilient capitalism, might be shaking the foundations of capitalism today. The critical divide between humans and other species lies in the fact that human reproduction is based on individual free will. In contemporary capitalistic societies, individual decision-making regarding reproduction has aggregated and manifested as declining birthrates. In countries such as Japan, where the birth rate is well below the replacement level but is reluctant to introducing immigrants, the population decline has already materialized. The intergenerational reproduction of the labor force is essential for the long-term sustainability

of capitalism. Therefore, declining birthrates and the resultant population decline signify a crisis for capitalism because this condition is not satisfied. If this understanding is correct, it implies that human freedom is the ignition point of a crisis for capitalism. If the state power recognizes population decline as a crisis for capitalism, it may implement more coercive population policies which potentially undermine the right to self-determination of reproduction. This report is based on such concerns.

Marx (1867: 718) stated, “the maintenance and reproduction of the working class is, and must be, a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital.” Without labor power, capital cannot be accumulated. Since the working class comprises the majority of the population, its reproduction is crucial for the survival of both capital and the state. Despite this, neither can generate the population on their own. Thus, the research question of how capital and the state have faced this challenge is immensely important for the political economy.

However, until recently, political economy has not actively addressed the reproduction of population. The central task of political economy has been critical analysis of the problems caused by the expansion and growth of capitalism, with poverty and social pathology being representative of such issues. Malthus argued that poverty and social pathology were not caused by specific social regimes such as capitalism but were due to the universal and scientifically determinable relationship between food production and human population growth. There is an aversion within political economy to orthodox demography, which follows Malthusian naturalism (Robbins and Smith 2017). Consequently, political economy has seldom focused on demographic phenomena such as birth, death, and migration, which are the main subjects of orthodox demography.

On the other hand, because Marx regarded the creation of surplus population as a unique demographic law of capitalism, political

economy has accumulated substantial research on the nature of surplus population. However, Marx's understanding of the mechanisms by which surplus population is biologically reproduced remained within nearly the same naturalism as Malthusian one. This is evident in his statement, "the capitalist may safely leave its fulfilment to the labourer's instincts of self-preservation and propagation" (Marx 1867: 718). In other words, the existence of surplus population was considered as a materialistic precondition.

However, recent years have seen an increase in research within critical geographies that focuses on population (Bailey 2005; Robbins and Smith 2017; Nakazawa 2023). Even during the 1980s, when various fields of human geography were influenced by postmodernism, population geography remained largely untouched. Empiricist and positivist epistemologies still dominate population geography, with a continued emphasis on quantitative methodologies. Nevertheless, the 1990s saw the emergence of new trends such as political demography and the geopolitics of population (Bailey 2005; Robbins and Smith 2017). In demography and mainstream population geography, human individuals are reduced to a plain quantity, namely, population, and then statistically analyzed. As Michel Foucault demonstrated, the socially constructed concept of population is a governance technology created by biopower of the modern state, thanks to the invention of statistics (Foucault 2007). Since population is equated with national power and military strength, maintaining the optimal size and improving the quality of the population are vital for the state. In this process, biopower draw a fine line in the population, dividing "make live" and "let die". Furthermore, Marxist-inspired population geography has also developed, focusing on surplus population (Tyner 2013, 2015, 2016).

Since surplus population is a concept related to labor, it has attracted interest from labor geography (Strauss 2018, 2020a, 2020b). Labor

geography emerged from similar critical perspectives as critical population geography. Labor geography criticizes the reduction of workers to mere labor force as a production factor and claims the fair evaluation of workers as active agents shaping the economic landscape of capitalism (Herod 2001). As labor geography developed, reflective studies emerged, focusing on workers whose inherent agency was constrained and oppressed (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011; Mitchell 2011). It is these workers that are regarded as the surplus population inescapable from precarity. Here, the notion of precarity unites the interests of critical population geographers and labor geographers.

Appropriately, a series of critical geographical studies have highlighted how people, as populations or labor forces, are lumped together under capitalism and burdened with precarity as a class. Nonetheless, the biological reproduction of humans constituting the population is often taken for granted. Therefore, the idea that self-determination in reproduction could undermine the sustainability of capitalism is missing. This report aims to fill this academic gap, based on experiences in Japan.

I have chosen this topic for the plenary speech because the notable decrease in birthrates is a common characteristic across East Asia. Although Japan's birthrate is often said to be remarkably low, it is relatively high among East Asian countries and regions. In this context, numerous demographic studies on declining birthrates have been certainly conducted in each country and region. However, there is little research on population from a critical geographical perspective: My intervention counts for something.

2. Intervention in reproduction and mobilization of labor

As in many countries, in Japan before the end of World War II, the population was considered the source of national strength and military power. Therefore, the primary goal of

population policy was to encourage births, or pronatalism. However, due to Japan's limited land and scarce natural resources, population growth inevitably led to overpopulation. This led Japan towards colonialism, and many geographers ended up supporting the imperial regime through commitment to geopolitics (Shibata 2016). Japan expanded its territories in East Asia and sought to solve the overpopulation problem by exporting surplus population to its *de facto* colonies and importing staples produced there. The defeat in the war resulted in Japan losing its colonies. The food imports from the colonies ceased, and many people returned to the mainland. The combined total of repatriated soldiers and returnees from the colonies exceeded 6.6 million. With men returning to society and a period of peace beginning, a baby boom occurred in the late 1940s. Thus, overpopulation became the most pressing issue for post-war Japan.

Facing overpopulation, the government completely reversed its pre-war pronatalism and shifted towards birth control. The key measure for birth control was legitimization of induced abortion (Norgren 2001; Tama 2006; Ogino 2008). In 1949, abortion for economic reasons was legalized in Japan, although certification from the eugenic authority was required at that time. By 1952, abortion for economic reasons could be performed at the request of pregnant women. Consequently, the number of abortions surged, exceeding one million annually. This caused a sharp decline in birth numbers and total fertility rate (TFR), and Japan's demographic transition was completed in less than a decade. Thus, in Japan, the national-scale issue of overpopulation was overcome by intervening in women's bodies and reproduction (Nakazawa 2019).

From 1955, when the demographic transition was being achieved, Japan entered a period of high economic growth that continued until the oil shock. The challenge for the state during the high growth period was the spatial mismatch of labor between urban and rural areas. The major

metropolitan areas, particularly the Tokyo metropolitan area, promoted Japan's high economic growth. In these metropolitan areas, labor shortages emerged due to the expansion of industries. On the other hand, in rural areas, industrial growth lagged: The labor market was underdeveloped and thus surplus labor was there.

The institutionalization of the new graduate labor market bridged employment opportunities in metropolitan areas with the labor supply from rural areas (Yamaguchi 2016). Until the mid-1960s, most young people entering the labor market were junior high school graduates, followed by an increase in high school graduates from the late 1960s. Junior-high and high schools functioned as employment agencies, selecting pupils on behalf of companies. The important selection criteria were pupils' academic performance and conduct, for schools wished to build strong and trustful relationship with good employers by sending diligent recruits each year.

At that time, there were substantial differences in living standards between metropolitan and rural areas based on the regional income disparities. Therefore, many junior high and high school graduates from rural areas chose to migrate to metropolitan areas. Reflecting the mobility of young people, the metropolitan areas experienced significant net in-migration during the high growth period.

Junior high and high school graduates from rural areas were transported to metropolitan areas by train exclusively for them (Yamaguchi 2016). They migrated to metropolitan areas, envisioning a better life. However, there was structural discrimination between them and metropolitan natives. Rural-origin graduates were employed by significantly smaller companies than their Tokyo-native counterparts, even with the same education level (Kase 1997). Thus, the structure of the new graduate labor market included a system where job vacancies that could not be filled by metropolitan natives were filled by graduates with rural origins.

As population concentration in metropolitan areas progressed during the high growth period, the main agents of population reproduction in Japan shifted from extended rural families to urban nuclear families. Urban nuclear families were modern heterosexual families based on gendered division of labor. Many of these families lived in the suburbs, with the breadwinner husband commuting to the city center and the wife taking on all the reproductive duties. This gendered division of labor corresponded to the spatial structure of Japan's metropolitan areas, where city centers and suburbs were clearly separated (Nakazawa 2019). Supported by high marriage rates and stable employment exclusively for men, Japan's birthrate almost retained the replacement level until 1974.

During this time, it was clear that “not giving birth” for women and their families and “moving to the cities” for rural-origin individuals led to a better life in terms of material living standards. Therefore, such state interventions in reproduction and labor mobilization, accompanied by unfairness, were accepted by the public. In other words, it was a rare period when individual pursuits of happiness and societal benefits aligned.

3. Implementation of “Regional Revitalization”: Pronatalism as progrowth

The stable growth period between the oil shock and the bursting of the bubble economy was a transitional phase, and this report does not delve into it in detail. However, it can be noted that clear state interventions in reproduction and labor mobility were absent during this period. Declining birthrates were not yet a clear concern,

and the pressing issue recognized then was the aging population. However, as soon as the stable growth period began, the birthrate fell below the replacement level, and this state has continued to the present. From the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, net in-migration to metropolitan areas decreased sharply, approaching a balance between in-migration and out-migration. This period, often called the “Era of Regions,” saw an increase in employment opportunities in rural areas due to the dispersion of manufacturing plants. In Japan, a real estate bubble emerged from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, during which net in-migration to the Tokyo metropolitan area increased again.

In 1991, the real estate bubble burst, and Japan entered a low-growth period that continues to this day. The 1990s to the 2000s were characterized by the recognition of youth problems. In 1990, the TFR fell below the anomaly recorded in 1966 of hinoeuma year¹, leading to the recognition that declining birthrates were a serious issue. This is known as the 1.57 shock. In 1994, the national master plan for addressing declining birthrates (Angel Plan) was formulated.

With the burst of the bubble, companies refrained from hiring new employees to reduce personnel costs, thus youth unemployment and unstable employment became apparent. Consequently, the period from 1993 to the mid-2000s was known as the “Employment Ice Age.” The younger generation of this period, the “Ice Age Generation,” tended to delay economic independence and marriage, further lowering the birthrate. The increase in unmarried young people living with and dependent on their parents led to the term “parasite singles” (Yamada 1999). Youth represented strength until then, but this period marked the discovery

1 There is a Japanese superstition that women who are born in a specific zodiac year (Hinoe-Uma) are destined to harm the husband, with its origin being unsure. The number of births in 1966 was 25% lower than the former year (Ito and Bando 1987).

of socially disadvantaged youth (Miyamoto 2002). In the early 2000s, active labor market policies targeting young people were initiated to address youth issues. This was a kind of workfare scheme (Peck 2001) targeted at young individuals who faced difficulties (Nakazawa 2014). At that time, the sense of impending structural problems was still weak.

In contrast to the 2000s when companies were keen on reducing surplus personnel, the 2010s saw the emergence of labor shortages, leading to the resolution of youth problems. Simultaneously, population decline, the concentration of population in Tokyo (Tokyo overconcentration), and the low growth of the national economy emerged as significant structural issues facing Japan. Social policies until the high growth period were designed to address the distortions caused by population and economic expansion and growth. However, once expansion and growth were disrupted, social policies began to explore measures to mobilize social elements—particularly the youth and regions—to return to the path of expansion and growth. The most emblematic of these is the “Regional Revitalization” initiative that began in 2014. Despite various twists and turns, this series of policies continues to be led by the Cabinet Office. The salient feature of “Regional Revitalization” is that the demographic issue, i.e., population decline due to low birthrates, and the geographical issue, i.e., Tokyo overconcentration and the unsustainability of rural municipalities, have been treated as two sides of the same coin.

Historically, the flow of people from rural areas to metropolitan areas (especially the Tokyo metropolitan area) has been continuing with fluctuations. Since 2000, the concentration in Tokyo has tended to increase, particularly among young women. Because the Tokyo metropolitan area’s TFR is far low compared to the national average, the concentration of the population of reproductive age (particularly women) in Tokyo accelerates the overall population decline. Meanwhile, in rural areas,

the absolute number of the population of reproductive age has decreased along with the population outflow, leading to a reduction in the number of births. This situation is creating municipalities that may become unsustainable due to population decline in the future (Masuda 2014).

Based on these future projections, four goals were set for the first phase of “Regional Revitalization.” Namely,

1. Create jobs in regional areas and ensure a secure working environment
2. Establish new flows of people to regional areas
3. Fulfill the marriage, childbirth, and child-rearing aspirations of the younger generation
4. Develop regions that are in tune with the times, ensure safe and secure living conditions, and foster cooperation between regions

As mentioned, when the population concentrates in the Tokyo metropolitan area, the national population decline accelerates. To overcome this, time-honored promotion of marriage and childbirth is installed. However, past experiences have shown that these policies alone are not effective. Therefore, the main framework of “Regional Revitalization” is to encourage migration to rural areas with relatively higher birthrates and to establish economic and living foundations that support childbirth and child-rearing there. This indicates that the main goal of “Regional Revitalization” is not to revitalize regions to improve the welfare of people living in declining rural areas. Rather, it is a set of measures to overcome population decline to boost the national economy (Nakazawa 2024).

“Regional Empowerment for Japan’s Growth” presented by Cabinet Office underwrites the validity of this interpretation:

A decrease in consumption and manpower places a heavy burden on the Japanese economy. To counter this decline, and to maintain the population at 100 million by

2060, the Japanese government has designed a series of policies aimed at revitalizing the local economy, a key factor in overcoming population decline.²

Evidently, the decline in population is considered problematic because it hinders the growth of the national economy. Thus, pronatal policies are progrowth policies.

It should be also noted that policies concerning immigration constitute an important context for “Regional Revitalization.” Although Japan has already accepted many foreign workers, prime ministers to date repeatedly declared that the government will not adopt immigration policies that grant citizenship or permanent residency to foreigners to maintain the population size. In other words, when discussing population decline in Japan, the implicit assumption is the decline of the ethnic Japanese population. Thus, prenatal policies reflect ethnocentrism.

4. Reproduction boycott

The “Regional Revitalization” policy is currently ongoing with minor tuning, thus its success or failure cannot be evaluated yet. Although the first phase of “Regional Revitalization” has already ended, it coincided with the expansion of COVID-19, making it difficult to purely assess the policy’s achievement. However, the government’s assessment report states, “Significant progress has been seen in job creation and town and regional development. On the other hand, the effects of creating new flows of people to rural areas and marriage, childbirth, and child-rearing

have not yet fully manifested.”³ This means that the government itself acknowledges that there were areas in the first phase of “Regional Revitalization” where policy effects were insufficient. Contrary to the policy intentions, the net migration to the Tokyo metropolitan area has increased since the start of the first phase of “Regional Revitalization.” During the outbreak of COVID-19, there was a trend of people moving away from densely populated metropolitan areas and the popularization of remote work, leading to a temporary decline in net migration to the Tokyo metropolitan area. However, as COVID-19 subsides, the net migration to the Tokyo metropolitan area is increasing again. The government encouraged people, especially the youth, to relocate to rural areas to mitigate the Tokyo overconcentration that accelerates population decline. However, this recommendation seems to have been boycotted.

How about measures against declining birthrates? The justification for marriage and birth promotion lies in the reality that people wish to marry and have children but cannot realize these desires. The Japanese government justifies the implementation of countermeasures against declining birthrates, saying that while the non-marriage rate is rising and birthrates are declining, young people’s desires for marriage and childbirth remain strong. However, since 2000, the percentage of unmarried individuals who say they “do not intend to marry for life” has been increasing⁴. Additionally, the desired number of children for unmarried women has fallen below two in 2022 for the first time since the survey (see footnote 4) began. Since the start of the first phase of “Regional Revitalization”,

2 https://www.japan.go.jp/regions/_userdata/pdf/A4_12P.pdf (last accessed 6 July 2025).

3 Minutes of the Fifth Meeting of the Expert Council on Formulating the Second Phase “Town, People, and Work Creation Comprehensive Strategy”, pp.2-3. https://www.chisou.go.jp/sousei/meeting/senryaku2nd_sakutei/r01-05-23-gijiyoushi.pdf (last accessed 6 July 2025).

4 https://www.ipss.go.jp/site-ad/index_japanese/shussho-index.html (last accessed 6 July 2025).

Japan's TFR has significantly declined. This is partly because people's desires for marriage and childbirth themselves have diminished. Merely fulfilling people's desires is no longer enough to maintain the population size. In other words, the government's promotion of marriage and childbirth has been boycotted.

Research focusing on the phenomenon that I have termed "Reproduction Boycott" has just begun. Many states recognize the declining birthrate and resulting population decline as crises and strengthen pronatal population policies. Feminist population researchers see potential in birth strikes as resistance to pronatal policies aimed at maintaining or increasing the population (Brown 2019; Davidson 2025). In fact, in South Korea, a women's social movement called the "4B movement" has emerged, which boycotts marriage, childbirth, dating, and sex as a protest against the deeply rooted patriarchy and misogyny in Korean society (Lee and Jeong 2021).

In response to situations that can be termed "Reproduction Boycott," the Japanese government has established the Children and Families Agency in 2023. In addition to a set of cliched childcare policies, this agency also carries out mild propaganda strategies such as designating "Family Day" and holding family photo contests. As such, Japan's birth promotion measures are not very coercive thus far.

In authoritarian countries, there are cases of blatant interventions in reproduction. In Russia, the number of births began to significantly decline around 2015. Amid the labor shortage exacerbated by the prolonged invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government banned the dissemination of information related to being "child-free."⁵ They also tightened regulations on abortions. As part of propaganda, President Putin revived the Soviet-era title of "Mother

Heroine," awarded to women who bear ten or more children, equivalent in status to the "Hero of Labor."⁶

5. Humans neither for the state nor capitalism

Since the Industrial Revolution, the world's population has continued to increase rapidly. Therefore, population problems have commonly been understood to mean Malthusian overpopulation. However, the global population growth rate is expected to decline, and it is estimated that the world's population may begin to decrease as early as around 2050. In the near future, the meaning of population problems on a global scale is likely to change to the opposite.

This global trend underlies Japan's experiences. During the high-growth period, Japan's population problem was Malthusian overpopulation. In response, birth control measures were enforced through the legalization of abortions. The geographical issue was the spatial mismatch of labor between metropolitan and rural areas. This was addressed by institutionalizing logistics that sent new graduates from rural schools to metropolitan employers. During the low-growth period, the population problem changed to be the population decline due to decreasing birthrates. In response, pronatal population policies were implemented. The geographical issue was the Tokyo overconcentration and the disappearing municipalities. This was addressed by encouraging migration from metropolitan to rural areas. This comparison reveals that the state's policy requests on people through policies were completely opposite during the high-growth and low-growth periods. Such requests were accepted during the high-growth period but boycotted during the low-growth period.

5 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-battling-birth-rate-dip-is-working-child-free-ideology-ban-says-putin-2024-09-24/> (last accessed 14 July 2025).

6 <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/08/16/putin-revives-soviet-mother-heroine-title-a78580> (last accessed 6 July 2025).

The policy requests were accepted during the high-growth period because complying with them was thought to pave a road to a better life. However, today, individual pursuits of happiness and rights are not aligned with the societal benefits sought, and this misalignment is unlikely to be fixed soon. Therefore, it is nearly impossible for current policies to stop population decline or reverse the concentration in Tokyo. The guardians of democracy will not overlook state powers implementing coercive pronatalism or aggressive migration policies under the guise of societal benefits. The exercise of power that treats humans as a measure to achieve policy goals should be rejected. Movements akin to the reproductive boycott are emerging in South Korea. The freedom to engage in such a movement is a hard-won result of the long and arduous struggle against patriarchy and authoritarian biopower. We must retain the right to self-determination of reproduction.

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