

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

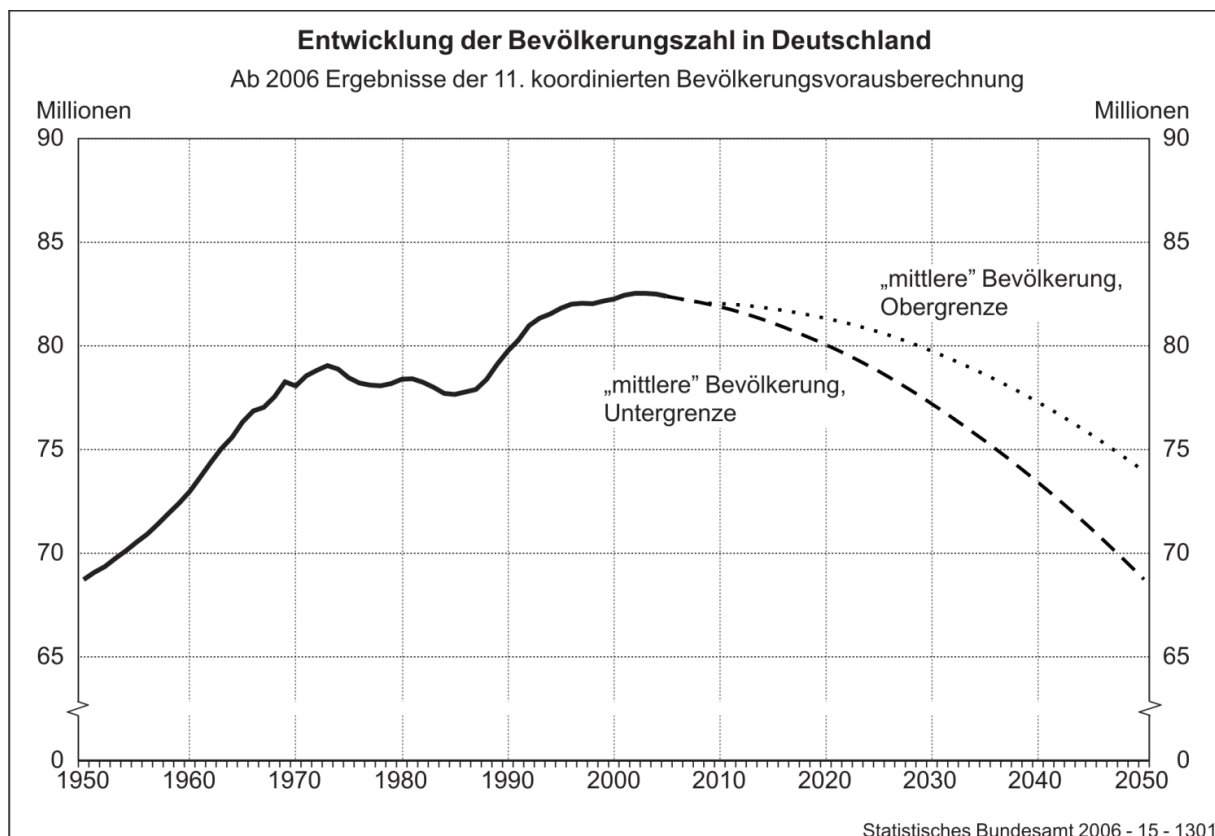
NOTE: This extended abstract is not representative for the current state of my dissertation and only focused on context explanations. The EPC Poster would provide an overview of the entire project including the recent Destatis projection for 2060 as well as an overview of the text corpora for the discourse analysis and first results emerging until September 2010.

As Teitelbaum and Winter expressed in their book of 1985, "The fear of population decline" is a quite old phenomenon in demography. According to this, the Spanish demographer Andreu Domingo (2008) has developed the term "demodystopias" in his examination of apocalyptical demographic discourses in the field of modern literature of more than hundred past years. It embodies a basically broader concept than just population decline, but provides one word in order to summarize the most topic-related publications in the German mass-media as well as parts of the scientific discourse dealing with the topic of Demographic Change. Since 2000 lots of examples can be found in the headlines of German newspapers and magazines, like the translations of the following representative examples show:

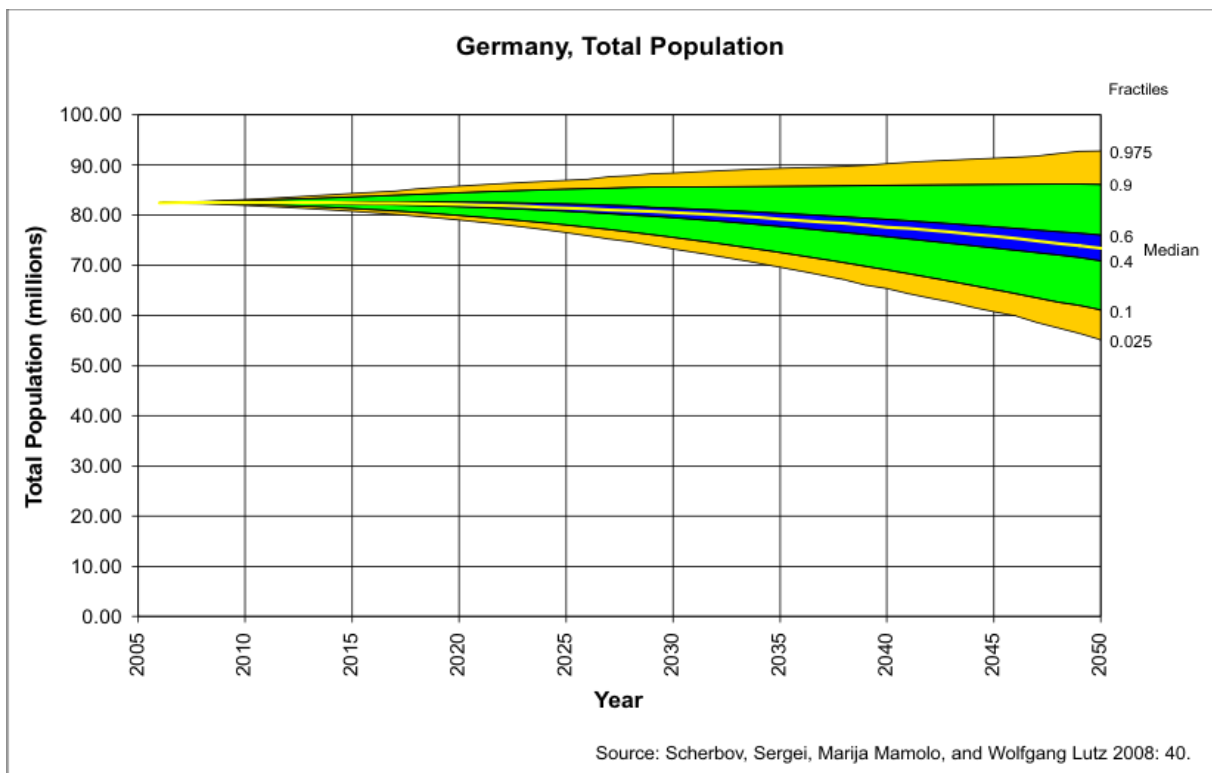
- "Land without people" (Die Zeit 20/2001)
- "The aged republic" (Die Zeit 02/2003)
- "The last German – on the way to the elderly republic" (Spiegel 2004-05-01)
- "In twelve generations we Germans will become extinct " (BILD 2006-03-15)
- "German population is shrinking and aging dramatically" (Spiegel 2006-11-07)

Especially since the millennium, Demographic Change has been signified with a negative or even apocalyptical meaning in the most European countries and especially in Germany. Basically, Demographic Change could simply be interpreted 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 problematic consequences of the Demographic Change in a basically uncertain future, driven by the developments of the underlying demographic data and its projections. Fertility decline and expanding life-expectancy are considered as the triggers of this development. But in contrast to the suggestions of the mass-media, I would argue that there is a variety of more reflected positions existing in demography, regardless of the fundamental dominance of this topic especially in the recent German discourse.

Concerning this matter, there exist several different and partially antagonistic positions regarding 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 apocalyptic 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, but apparently structural responsibility. In contrast to these discourses, the topic evokes a quite strong polarization in the academic field. "Apocalyptic" Demographers deduced normative and political implications. This culminates in positions like that the German population will become extinct within twelve Generations, as stated above. The author was Herwig Birg, who is still playing a role in German mass-medial and scientific demographic discourses, especially in recent population projections of the German Federal Statistical Office (Destatis). In contrast to such statements, the official publications of Destatis (2006) or the Federal Institute for Population Research (2004) basically provide more moderate utterances. But regardless of noting 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, which is shown by the following graph:



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 following one by the Vienna Institute of Demography are able to show the complete confidence intervals of the future development, still according to the underlying assumptions, which we can see on the next graph on the following page. It is also obvious, that the modified scales of the axes lead to additional dramatization of the visually mediated utterance of the last Destatis projection in contrast to the recent VID version. If we imagine us self to be a journalist without any scientific background, it will be clear that both different graphs imply different utterances. Especially for non-experts the high risk of a misinterpretation of the results is obvious. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the more neutral graph of the VID would produce any noticeable impact in the media because in contrast to the apocalyptic version of Destatis, because its main utterance is simply an open future:



In conclusion, a population projection can regardless of the used methods only be as good as the underlying assumptions, which is a point that obviously would be agreed by every serious demographer. 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 it could be at least more reliable. Consequently, demographic views into the German future can be discussed quite controversial.

Taking this into account, the recent brochure of the Rostocker Zentrum zur Erforschung des Demografischen Wandels (Tivig/ Hetze 2007) at the MPIDR points out that demographic developments are also results of socio-economic and political developments, a fact 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 my 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 my 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.

Via a genealogical discourse analysis I intend to reject such pessimistic positions and to reflect and deconstruct its underlying normative and epistemological premises. Distortions caused by the functional logics of the mass-media will also be included, as well as inner-demographical debates regarding the role of population projections. Michel Foucault’s legacy and its ongoing reception provide the fundamental toolbox for examining the conditions of the existence of these specific games of truth as well as connected power relations. This interdisciplinary project is based on several digitalized text corpora consisting of newspapers, newswires, press-kits of Destatis and demographic publications since 2000. The examination of the underlying formal demographic knowledge will be linked to specific production mechanisms in the mass media and the political instrumentalization of such “Demodystopias”. These play a crucial role in the present governmentality and combine Foucault’s classic dimensions of interest: knowledge, power and the care of the self.

selected references:

- **Domingo, Andreu (2008):** “Demodystopias”: Prospects of Demographic Hell. In: Population and Development Review 34(4), December 2008, S. 725-745.
- **Scherbov, Sergei et. al. (2008):** Probabilistic Population Projections for the 27 EU Member States Based on Eurostat Assumptions. (http://www.oeaw.ac.at/vid/download/edrp_2_08.pdf)
- **Statistisches Bundesamt (2006):** Bevölkerung Deutschlands bis 2050. 11. koordinierte Bevölkerungsvorausberechnung. Presseexemplar. Wiesbaden: Statistisches Bundesamt (www.destatis.de)