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## **For critical geo-histories of population. Engaging geographically with Massimo Livi Bacci's works**

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims at calling geographers' attention to the works of Italian historical demographer Massimo Livi Bacci, who authored fundamental texts on the indigenous genocide in the Americas, on the history of world population, on global migrations and on population's environmental 'sustainability'. In denouncing colonial crimes, critically questioning commonplaces of Malthusian origin and challenging sovereigntist prejudices against migrations, Livi Bacci stresses the need for scholars to fully address the complex relations between space and population in both analyses of empirical cases and elaborations of broader theoretical models. He explicitly raises geopolitical matters on the potential political consequences of demographic and migratory dynamics. Yet, Livi Bacci's huge scholarly production is highly influential among historians and demographers, but seems to have been overlooked by most geographers hitherto. For these reasons, I argue that scholars committed to critical, radical and decolonial geographies of population (past and present) should (re)discover Livi Bacci's contributions. Re-reading Livi Bacci's works through geographical lenses and connecting them with current geographical scholarship, I show how 'geo-demography' can help geographers to address demographic matters at different scales, by providing insights for a new critical geo-history of population. This interdisciplinary engagement with the relations between geopolitical matters on sustainability and the ongoing changing in global population has the potential to plurally nourish critical geographical agendas, including on global migrations and colonial legacies.*

**Keywords:** Geodemography; Decoloniality; Critical Geopolitics; Migrations; Historical Geography; Malthusianism

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This paper argues that geographers should discover Massimo Livi Bacci's works, to extend current scholarship on population geography and migration by connecting geo-demographic works to critical and decolonial strands in historical geography. Rediscovering the effectiveness of historically-minded approaches in understanding current problems can enrich a 'sub-disciplinary' field, population geography, that has been mainly 'recognised for its quantitative expertise' (Finney 2021, 577) hitherto. While current definitions such as 'geodemographics' are generally associated with GIS, statistics and spatial modelling (Birkin and Clark 2009; Singleton 2020), critical scholarship calls for diversifying methods and adopting critical approaches in the field (Bailey 2009; Finney 2021; Legg 2005; Robbins and Smith 2017; Tyner 2015 and 2016). Although relatively little connected with these strands, historical geography produced numerous valuable studies on empirical cases in historical populations (Newson, 2006; Wu et al. 2011; Evered and Evered 2011; Kanzaka 2018; Sarcar 2022) that can be further enriched by Livi Bacci's idea of geodemography, stressing the need of studying populations in their historical and geographical contexts.

For Livi Bacci, historical approaches are indispensable to 'try to assess some aspects and paradigms of population history that could be replicated in the future, with the variations and adaptations dictated by changing contexts' (Livi Bacci 2015b, 21). This includes going beyond narrow specialisms to see wider pictures such as: 'The geodemography of the world; that is, the demographic characteristics and distribution of people according to their geographical location. For a long time this aspect has been neglected' (Livi Bacci 2015b, 21). Livi Bacci calls 'geo-demographic revolution' the twentieth-century huge processes that led in few decades Europe, 'a small portion of the planetary landmass' (Livi Bacci 2005b, 24), to lose its demographic centrality alongside its colonial empires and geopolitical global power. Europe eventually became 'importer instead of exporter of human resources' (Livi Bacci 2019a, 81). As demographers note, such 'geographical reconstitution of demographic systems' (Quilodrán 2005, 160) needs contextual and interdisciplinary readings of demographic realities (Alba 2005). Thus, the acute geographical sensitivity of a demographer like Livi Bacci emerges in his efforts to bring spatiality to his

discipline, which he considers to be often affected by what population geographers traditionally lament with other social scientists, that is a ‘lack of spatial consciousness’ (Hugo 2006, 520).

An Italian scholar with a strong international and multilingual profile, Livi Bacci served until retirement as a Professor of Demography at the University of Florence and was also active in politics, serving as a Senator for the Democratic Party from 2006 to 2013. A still very active author, including with contributions to demography blogs,<sup>1</sup> Livi Bacci works by what the population geographers mentioned above consider ‘mixing methods’. It is the case with a wide set of (quantitative and qualitative) historical sources including archival records, that the author discusses with the help of both critical theory and demographic indicators such as rates of natality, nuptiality and mortality, and the structure of populations per sex and age. Mostly translated into English and abundantly provided with graphs and maps, Livi Bacci’s books are not often quoted by geographers, although some reviews published by geography journals present them as an example of studying contextual factors in addressing population mobility, defined as ‘the intersectionality of migration processes’ (Smith and King 2012, 127). Reviewers note the importance of crossing ‘epidemiology, chronology and geography’ (Gans 2001, 63) to address the classic demographic theme of the impact of diseases on big populations, as well as Livi Bacci’s ability to deal ‘with a research literature in all the main European languages’ (White 2002, 422).

Crucially, Livi Bacci’s idea of research ethics implies that scholars cannot afford the luxury of pretending ‘objectivity’ or ‘neutrality’. For the Italian demographer, doing scholarship means taking stances to socially and politically commit to the progress of society. Livi Bacci especially advocates international agreements that consider global migrations as something normal, to be managed as an opportunity rather than a problem. He expresses disappointment for the poor engagement with migration policies of United Nations’ SDGs debates because, as he states bitterly: ‘No country is disposed to give up the slightest portion of their sovereignty for this matter’ (Livi Bacci 2019b). For Livi Bacci, it was a shame that, although not compulsory for the single

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance: <https://www.neodemos.info/>

states, the 2016 ‘New York Declaration on Migrants and Refugees’ was stopped by fourteen sovereignist governments (including Italy and the United States) which did not approve its parts about ‘full social inclusion and cohesion’, which acknowledged that migrants can contribute ‘to the sustainable development of their receiving countries’ (Livi Bacci 2019b).

This meant sacrificing human rights and humanitarian concerns, as well as despising ‘migrants’ rights’ (Livi Bacci 2019b). While talking to heated political debates on sovereignism and xenophobia in Western societies, Livi Bacci’s concerns match current critical geographies and geopolitics of mobility that criticise ideas of territorial sovereignty and linear boundaries as instruments serving biopolitical (and necropolitical) control over migrants’ and refugees’ bodies (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015; Cresswell 2006; Minca et al. 2022; Tazzioli 2023). Livi Bacci’s ideas of social engagement likewise match the general consensus existing among geographers of population on the need to foster the social and political relevance of the field (Bailey 2005; Tyner 2013; Findlay 2005; Finney 2021; Smith 2018).

This task appears as a key concern in the periodical reports on the state of the ‘subdiscipline’ that are annually published by *Progress in Human Geography* and by specialised supports such as *Population, Space and Place* (formerly *International Journal of Population Geography*). While stating the need for ‘developing epistemological multilingualism’ (Finney 2021) starting from current methodological plurality, population geographers increasingly address politics and geopolitics of demography. Among others, James Tyner adopts a Marxist perspective in assessing current studies on ‘necropolitics, thanatopolitics, “deathscapes”, and the inequalities of premature death’ (Tyner 2015, 360). This serves to understand the social and political engineering of classical demographic indicators such as mortality, in the broader context of capitalist social reproduction (Tyner 2016). Tyner highlights the importance of making critical geographies of the political construction of ‘surplus population’ to explore vulnerability and ‘survivability’ (Tyner 2013, 704) by analysing how political powers decide who can live and who must die, interfering with individuals’ bodily existence. This is a theme that recalls Livi Bacci’s discourses on Malthusian debates and migration politics as I detail below.

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Paul Robbins and Sarah Smith call attention to another key theme for Livi Bacci, that is global concerns on population's perspective development and structural change. They eventually discuss matters with declining fertility, including in countries of the so-called 'Global South', and their impact on economies and societies. What they call 'intimate geopolitics of demography' suggests a deeper and politically self-reflective 'engagement of critical human geography with issues of demographic change' (Robbins and Smith 2017, 200). According to Robbins and Smith, understanding social matters implies reflection on 'birth, death, and the presence and absence of labouring bodies' (Robbins and Smith 2017, 213). In works such as *Concise History of World Population* (2017) and *Our Shrinking Planet* (2017), Livi Bacci exactly deals with this kind of matters, providing insights on the need to remain flexible in theory to can address changing and dynamic empirical realities, avoiding big generalisations. This means considering the differentials that exist in the age structures of different countries to envision the potential geopolitical consequences of the incoming changes in the respective presence of young population feeding labour markets, or elderly population to assist (Livi Bacci 2017b).

Thus, geographers would benefit from closer engagement with Livi Bacci's works on global population and sustainability to foster what Darren Smith defines 'the potential for population geography to inform political and policy debates such as Brexit' (Smith 2019, 730), which includes engaging with growing scholarship in 'migration studies' (Smith 2018, 297), not only using statistical methods but also qualitative inquiries on what happens to migrant populations over time. Yet, historical approaches and geo-historical methodologies remain underutilised in current geographical literatures. In the following sections, I provide some examples of the potential usefulness of engaging with Livi Bacci's geo-demography to enhance these debates.

In the first part, I discuss Livi Bacci's works on Malthusianism and global population. For this matter, I consider both historical geographies and intellectual histories of Malthusianism and current critical geographical scholarship on 'food security' and colonial engineerings of hunger and scarcity. There, I contend that, criticising Malthusianism without dismissing the importance of

addressing issues with growing populations, Livi Bacci's scholarship can productively nourish these scholarly strands. In the second part, I engage with Livi Bacci's geo-demography of traumas, including indigenous genocide. While Livi Bacci's discussions may not be an absolute novelty for Latin American decolonial scholarship addressing indigenous and Afro-descendent (ongoing) genocides, they provide a great synthesis to think which roles geography played in the success or unsuccess or indigenous resistance and/or mere survival. Then, Livi Bacci's analyses of the demographic shocks of twentieth-century Europe strengthen classical decolonial arguments for the 'provincialization' of this latter which is further shown by recent demographic dynamics. In the third part, I address the demographer's views on current matters of migration, sustainability and geopolitical unbalances to be potentially provoked by populational changes. This part of Livi Bacci's work shows the need for supranational politics to resolve social and environmental problems at the global level, chiming with critical geopolitics that criticises the very notions of nation-state, borders and territorial sovereignty.

### **Space and demography: Malthus and around**

In *Concise History of World Population*, Livi Bacci addresses concerns that recall the controversial legacy of a classical author who, as Adrian Bailey summarises: 'Linked the idea of population with geography to comment on just these issues of wealth, health and ecological sustainability' (Bailey 2005, 191). That is, reverend Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834), whose works including the famous 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population* were the object of disputed receptions that have been recently investigated by historical geographer Robert Mayhew, arguing that Malthus asked questions still valid 'for his own society and for ours' (Mayhew 2014, 2) on the relations between our planet and its resources. There, Mayhew matches Livi Bacci's ideas on the uses of history, arguing for the need 'to give historical depth to our present planetary concerns' (Mayhew 2014, 4).

While scholars in intellectual history should be aware of the risks of anachronism that all recontextualization of past authors imply, they know well how matters of reception and

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reappropriation can be complicated and controversial, often leading to opposite readings of the same author (Rupke 2008). In this vein, Mayhew highlights how, since his day until current debates, Malthus' figure has classically stimulated extreme reactions of either admiration or rejection paralleling political debates. It is worth noting that several critiques concerned the various evolutions of Malthusianism rather than Malthus's works, which remain often-commented and rarely-read texts (Mayhew 2016). Yet, today that public debates are ridden by anxieties for climate change and global sustainability, dealing with the historical depth of these phenomena implies necessarily, for Mayhew, resuming such debates. That is: 'Any attempt to develop environmental histories without an awareness of population debates is missing an important element of its story' (Mayhew 2022, 1), even more when dealing with (critical) historical geographies.

As for Livi Bacci, it can be said that, rather than to Malthusian schools, his own sensitivity is relatively closer to the geographical genealogies of those who challenged either Malthus's own theories or some versions of Malthusianism applied to political conservatism. It was the case with scholars and activists ranging from early anarchist geographers Elisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin to Brazilian 'geographer of hunger' Josué de Castro or contemporary scholars criticising notions on scarcity and food (in)security (Carter 2018; Davies 2023; Davis 2001; Ferretti 2021; Nally 2011). Yet, likewise interested in Malthus's intellectual genealogies (Livi Bacci 2018b), the Italian demographer admits the use of Malthusian elements in certain circumstances, alongside the need to consider the dynamic and contextual nature of the geographically and historically situated relations between population, environment and resources (Livi Bacci 2017a). As Mayhew puts it: 'Which type of resource it is feared population may stress, destroy, exhaust or overtop has changed over time' (Mayhew 2022, 2).

One of the most geographical parts of Livi Bacci's *Concise History*, the chapter on 'Labour and Population', exposes what the demographer considers as the two main 'schools' dealing with the relation between land and resources. The first is Malthusian, considering the growth of population as a negative factor, putting stress on a limited pool of resources. There, the 'concept of diminishing returns ... fundamental to the thought of both Malthus and [David] Ricardo' (Livi

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Bacci 2017a, 86), highlights the progressive depletion of a given portion of land which is subject to continue exploitation for agricultural uses. For Livi Bacci, this principle cannot be discarded a priori, but may only be applied to some historical cases. Conversely, the second ‘school’ is based on the idea that growing populations bolster economic growth through intensive agriculture or economies of scale and that, with the development of technologies, the positive relation between population and land becomes increasingly dynamic. Here, for Livi Bacci, an important geographical factor is the transformation of environments and intensification of production through human labour, whose dynamics are explained by economists such as Ester Boserup, whose model presenting population as an impulsion for ‘growth’ finds numerous historical confirmations (Livi Bacci 2017a).

Two key concepts remain a constant in Livi Bacci’s thought about these competing approaches. The first is that both models are geographical: ‘The models described above, whether Malthusian or Boserupian, depend on space; in the first case primarily as a determining factor of demographic change and in the second as a dimension that responds to and is altered by population growth or decline’ (Livi Bacci 2017a, 102). The second is that no model can become a dogma: for Livi Bacci, both sets of conceptual tools can serve to understand geo-demographic trends and can be productively used, at the condition of being always subject to empirical verification under the historical and geographical circumstances of each phenomenon. For Livi Bacci, the idea of a populational ‘optimum’ is chimeric, being ‘an essentially static concept [which] applies poorly to dynamic populations’ (Livi Bacci 2017a, 109).

Another conceptual tool that, for Livi Bacci, is fundamental to understand past changes and future perspectives of big populations, being likewise rich of geographical implications, is the notion of ‘demographic transition’. By this definition demographers mean the historical shift from Old Regime demography to industrial and post-industrial demography, which typically sees first a decline of mortality rates due to complex factors including hygiene and changing ways of life. After some decades, it is the natality rates which start decreasing, due again to a plurality of factors, one of the most important being the shift from rural to urban lifestyles, in which having a numerous

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family is a cost rather than a resource. While demographic transition is considered to have first affected Europe since the Industrial Revolution and then other regions including what was called the ‘Third World’, Livi Bacci stresses again that the idea of transition is only a conceptual tool to be adapted to different places and situations, which are never the same everywhere. Indeed, for Livi Bacci, geography matters to demographic transition as it occurred with different temporalities and modalities in different geographical areas, being now associated with what urban geographers consider the urbanisation of the world, which is modifying geopolitical and environmental dynamics worldwide (Brenner 2014).

Finally, assessing Malthusian potential dynamics in the future growth of world population, ‘transition’ considerations lead Livi Bacci to express some moderate optimism. That is, the Italian demographer hypothesises that the empirically noted tendency of historical populations ‘towards order and efficiency’ (Livi Bacci 2017a, 119) would counterbalance the possible effects of the ‘population bomb’ (Ehrlich 1971), that is the catastrophist nightmares of planetary overpopulation. What is key, for Livi Bacci, is to consider again ‘geodemography’, focusing on the faster perspective growth of population that will very likely occur in some countries of the Global South, leading to strong ‘geodemographic changes’ (Livi Bacci 2017a, 228). While I discuss the related geopolitical perspectives in the last section, it is now necessary to address the geographical features of Livi Bacci’s discussion of themes that are sadly central to historical demography: genocides and catastrophes.

### ***Conquista* and resized Europe: towards decolonial geo-demographies**

#### *Spaces of indigenous genocides*

Livi Bacci has always been especially interested in Iberian Americas and related figures in the history of geography. He dedicates some admiring pages to Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), highlighting the progressive aspects of the German geographer’s 1799-1804 journey to Hispanic America (Farinelli 1992), that Humboldt made as: ‘A fervent republican, detesting both the tyrannical rule of absolutism and blind obedience to the Church’ (Livi Bacci 2015a, 539). While

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assessing Humboldt's interest in American demography, Livi Bacci highly appreciates that the geographer was 'a resolute adversary of slavery [deeming it] the greatest evil that afflicts human nature' (Livi Bacci 2015a, 539). Humboldt was also one of the earliest 'advocates' of Amerindian peoples, an aspect of his work that was only highlighted in geographical scholarship in the last decade or so (Buttimer 2012). Thus, it is unsurprising that the most famous of Livi Bacci's works on genocides has been his book *Conquest and the destruction of American Indios* (2005[2008]), followed by further contributions on the theme, written in novel-like style (Livi Bacci 2009, 2012 and 2022a).

In *Conquest*, Livi Bacci vividly depicts the dynamics of the demographic collapse that Amerindian populations suffered since the arrival of the Europeans trying to make a synthesis that is both original and fit to a non-specialist public for very complex matters. Based on a thorough literature review and related archival research, Livi Bacci discusses the incredibly diverse estimations that exist about the initial number of people who lived in the Americas before 1492. Spanning between so different amounts such as 8,4 million for the lowest and 101,3 million for the highest (Livi Bacci 2005a, 245), these estimations will 'remain conjectural' (Livi Bacci 2005a, 33) for Livi Bacci as no formal census exist. However, more certain conclusions can be drawn as for the temporalities and causes of this demographic collapse which, even in the lowest estimations of the initial population, remains the biggest catastrophe of world demographic history.

While there is a certain consensus on the fact that the decrease of Amerindian population was quite sudden and started immediately after the contact with European colonisers, among Livi Bacci's contributions some commentators note his questioning of widespread ideas of 'epidemiologic determinism' (Domenici 2008). That is, for Livi Bacci, there are never monocausal explanations for complex phenomena. In addition to diseases, Livi Bacci discusses spatial displacement, intentional massacres and social de-structuring of Amerindian populations as co-causes of the Amerindian demographic disaster. Imported diseases alone, he argues, could not have the same effect without interacting with 'other aspects of colonialism': for Livi Bacci, the conquest 'was a total shock to the indigenous demographic system. War, forced labour, expropriation of resources,

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and other factors all combined to alter native reproduction' (Kelton 2008, 1479). Thus, the overall cause was 'the unsettling normality of conquest' (Livi Bacci 2003, 51): studies on sixteenth-century demographic shocks in other regions of the Spanish empire such as the Philippines show that diseases were far from being the sole cause of the phenomenon (Newson 2006).

These arguments may not sound as an absolute novelty for Latin American decolonial scholarship which is committed to denounce ongoing colonial violence and genocide against indigenous and Afro-descendent communities in the entire continent (Anthias 2018; Porto-Gonçalves and Araújo Quental 2012; Ruelle-Orihuela et al. 2023), including the gendered aspects of the exploitation of territories and indigenous bodies (Zaragocin and Caretta 2021). Yet, it is worth noting Livi Bacci's engagement with the earliest indigenous sources from a continent for which the definition of 'Latin America' results increasingly narrow and insufficient (Zaragocin 2023). For instance, *Conquest* contains illustrations and information from Guamán Poma de Ayala's *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno* ([1615] 1993), a work that is considered as a major reference for rediscovering indigenous epistemologies by Latin American decolonial authors (Mignolo 2011; Mignolo and Escobar 2010). Ayala's book was consulted by Livi Bacci, who highlights the fundamental value of this document for every 'history of conquest' (Livi Bacci 2005a, 319).

The demographer's engagement with Amerindian sources is also shown by the consultation of the 'Florentine Codex', the 'Mendoza codex' (Livi Bacci 2005a, 320) and similar documents accessed at the *Archivo General de las Indias* in Sevilla. In this vein, Livi Bacci tries to account for different surviving sources, addressing writings of authors such as the 'Indios' defender' Bartolomé de las Casas, as well as secondary literature by more contemporary Latin American scholars such as Venezuelan linguist Angel Rosenblat, Mexican anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán and Brazilian historian Jacob Gorender among many others (Livi Bacci 2005a).

While it would be impossible to discuss here all the complex matters that Livi Bacci's Americanistic production raises, it is worth noting that, again, geography plays a key role in his analyses. It is especially the case with the *Conquest* chapter on the case of Haiti/Hispaniola. There,

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the demographic destruction of local indigenous population, the Tainos, who were so unlucky to be the first ‘discovered’ and thus colonised people, started before the main epidemic ravages. While the assessment of the number of Tainos living in the island at the date of Columbus’s arrival is cause of heated disputes among scholars adopting respectively ‘high’ or ‘low’ estimations, Livi Bacci notes that: ‘The two schools agree in acknowledging the population’s substantial extinction around the half of the sixteenth century’ (Livi Bacci 2005a, 102).

According to Livi Bacci, the multicausality of this disaster included first direct violence and murder: the wars for the control of territory compelled the Tainos to flee from their cultivated lands facing ‘hunger’ (Livi Bacci 2005a, 120) despite their ‘active resistance’ (Livi Bacci 2005a, 123). While this remark confirms decolonial historiography arguing that Amerindian peoples were far from being passive or resigned before the invaders, having important histories of subaltern resistance, repression arguably intensified in the interior of the island, and these circumstances made Taino mortality peak. The disarticulation of Taino social structure had also consequences on declining natality starting with the early experimentation, in Hispaniola, of ‘the system of *encomienda*, with repartition of indigenous labour’ (Livi Bacci 2005a, 101) in slavery-like conditions, due first to the colonisers’ ‘greedy sake of gold’ (Livi Bacci 2005a, 103). Another social cause of declining fertility that should not be overlooked was the fact that a considerable number of young women were ‘subtracted from the Taino reproductive pool’ (Livi Bacci 2005a, 125) by the colonizers, who raised the resulting children as European (*criollos*) rather than indigenous.

While this definition of ‘reproductive pool’ commonly used by demographers may sound quite hurting to a feminist sensitivity, it is worth noting that these ‘subtractions’ were inserted in the context of colonial violence underpinning miscegenation as the historical result of colonial rapes and sexual exploitation of indigenous and Afro-descendant women. On these matters, contributions such as the critiques of Brazilian Black scholar Abdias Nascimento to Gilberto Freyre’s irenic ideas of ‘Luso-tropicalism’ and ‘racial democracy’ hiding the brutality of colonisation should never be forgotten (Nascimento 2017). Although this Afro-Brazilian

scholarship is not quoted in Livi Bacci's book, colonial violence quite clearly appears in his historical narrations.

In all this, space played again a key role. Hispaniola is an island: once fully colonized, there was no longer available space there for the Tainos to resist and reconstitute their society elsewhere. While all these factors importantly call attention on social, cultural and identitarian (rather than merely 'biological') aspects of peoples' 'extinctions', the spatial counter-example to the Haiti case was constituted by the huge hinterlands of continental Americas such as Amazonia—but also the large territories formerly occupied by Aztec and Inca empires. There, the availability of space allowed several indigenous groups to reproduce their ways of life in more remote places. While this paralleled the saga of rebel African slaves fleeing to form rebel communities such as *quilombos* and *palenques* (Ferretti 2022; Guillén 2021; Roberts 2015; Wright 2020), Livi Bacci notes that, in the case of Black communities, their demographic dynamics remained strongly constrained at least until the formal abolition of slavery in the second half of the nineteenth century. This was due to hard labour, social conditionings and 'the frequent intrusion of the White males in the Black reproductive pool', which altogether continued to imply 'higher mortality, and lower fertility of the Black population' (Livi Bacci 2023, 1) in cases such as Cuba, for which the aforementioned remarks as for the violence of colonial miscegenation likewise apply.

#### *Geodemography of a provincialized Europe*

Finally, in his geodemography resizing Europe in global geopolitical scenarios, Livi Bacci discusses the twentieth-century disasters that affected the Old Continent around the two World Wars (Livi Bacci 2020). This is again the occasion for developing a quite geographical discussion on whether one should attribute demographic traumas to 'nature' or 'politics', both provided with 'powerful destructive weapons' (Livi Bacci 2021, 580). As per 'nature', Livi Bacci basically considers the bacteriological factors which, until the nineteenth century, had stronger impacts than wars in diminishing European populations. However, the demographer acknowledges that so-called 'natural' and so-called 'political' factors are in mutual and 'perpetual interaction' (Livi Bacci 2021, 580). In twentieth-century Europe, for Livi Bacci, the tragic political novelty was the raising

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of the new nation-states' competing nationalisms based on excluding ethnic, linguistic and cultural identities that substituted the old (although illiberal) multiethnic and multilingual empires in Central and Eastern Europe. This led to 'intolerant hyperethnicism, culminating in ferocious episodes of ethnic cleansing and genocide' (Livi Bacci 2021, 579).

Here, the history of geography is mobilised, as Livi Bacci discusses ideas of *Lebensraum* first developed by Friedrich Ratzel (Klinke and Bassin 2018), although recognizing that the later use of this notion by Nazi and Fascist regimes went 'in a direction not sought by its author' (Livi Bacci 2021, 583). For the demographer, destructive factors were both Karl Haushofer's notion of geopolitics widely adopted by these regimes, and ideas in eugenics, namely when discussions on 'births deemed socially undesirable' (Livi Bacci 2021, 583) ceased to be mere academic exercises and started informing racist and totalitarian practices. The results were numerous episodes of population exchange and ethnic cleansing, also inspired by new biopolitical ideas that 'populations ... could be manipulated' (Livi Bacci 2021, 603) or forcibly moved, coming to genocides, of which the most dreadful was evidently the Shoah, but which included episodes such as the Armenian genocide or the Ukrainian *Holodomor*, when hunger was politically engineered to become 'a weapon' (Livi Bacci 2021, 601).

Moreover, for Livi Bacci, the two world wars did not only imply the death of dozens millions soldiers and civilians as a direct result of the combats, but also the loss of perspective population due to deteriorated conditions of living and fall of marriages, implying decreasing natality. These virtual losses are estimated at over 50 million people (Livi Bacci 2021, 589) only for World War I. These are only some of the premises for the geo-demographic 'revolution' of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in which the planetary role and perspectives of Europe is changing over demographic grounds that imply low fertility and, for the first time after several century, population's decrease.

Thus, narrated through the respective demographic catastrophes of these continents, both the denunciation of indigenous and Afro-descendant genocides and the discussion of what Livi Bacci

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considers to be Europe's demographic 'suicide' since the twentieth century serve to introduce the progressive provincialisation of the Old Continent and of the 'West' in relation to the 'Rest' that I discuss in the next section.

### **Mobile geo-histories and geopolitics of population**

If historical populations are dynamic, thus their migrations are one of the key factors through which understanding their perspectives and trends. For Livi Bacci, migrations are another point on which demography and geography should intersect, as it was through the occupation of space (arbitrarily considered as empty) that key events of modern history took literally place. It was the case with the European expansion in the Americas, or the equally spectacular expansion of another European empire, Russia, towards Central and Eastern Asia. Most of these migrations were intentionally and collectively organised at the political level (Livi Bacci 2019a and 2022a), which leads Livi Bacci to claim that today, although this may seem surprising following the rhetoric of certain political debates, the relative impacts of migrations on big populations are smaller than in the past centuries. Livi Bacci's main argument is that, based on empirical evidence collected throughout human history, migrating is a constant and absolutely normal 'prerogative of human beings' (Livi Bacci 2019a, 8).

This position should be first understood in the context of Italian and EU debates on migration, in which, for Livi Bacci, the civic and moral duty of population experts means showing to the broader society that migration is nothing strange and that, if well managed, it can be a resource rather than a problem. Such claims counter all racist, xenophobic and sovereignist political tendencies that produce the dreadful emergencies that we are seeing in the catastrophic humanitarian situation of the Mediterranean and other migrant routes (Minca et al. 2021). For Livi Bacci, among the many lessons that we can learn from the history of world population, one is that migration can be a solution to the 'demographic suicide' (Livi Bacci 2015b, 23) that is ongoing in numerous countries of the Global North such as Italy, where 'natural' (that is, calculated without migration) death rates have exceeded the birth rates, leading to the progressive decrease and ageing of local workforce.

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It is in the *Journal of Economic Geography* that, to the question on whether Europe needs mass immigration, Livi Bacci responds resolutely yes: ‘Europe will have to attract considerable inflows of immigrants in order to sustain a reasonable pattern of growth’ (Livi Bacci 2018a, 695). Importantly, this does not only correspond to utilitarian matters for relaunching the economy, but to the acknowledgement of ongoing transculturation for which: ‘Migrants in Europe, today, are a normal component of the human landscape; in some hours or places, in every day’s life, they are a majority .... Since the beginning of this century, 15% of the renewal of European societies has been assured by immigration’ (Livi Bacci 2018a, 695). This means abandoning any kind of biological racism or identitarianism in accepting that European societies shift from ‘biological reproduction’ to ‘social reproduction’ (Livi Bacci 2019a, 124) by extending citizenship towards a more open society, able to avail of the opportunities offered by immigration.

This is what Italy, for instance, has been largely unable to do, due to widespread anti-migrants prejudices that are heavily exploited by right-wing parties but also affect several sectors of so-called Centre-Left. What is key, geopolitically, is Livi Bacci’s claim that, in order to successfully and efficiently manage immigration, nation-states should give up some portions of their sovereignty. Currently, this sounds like a blasphemy for most European governments, but it exactly matches geographical scholarship criticising the sovereignty of nation-states, entities whose peculiar interests impede to resolve global crises needing shared international actions, such as climate change and refugees (Minca 2019).

It is exactly on environmental concerns for global futures that Livi Bacci, in *Our Shrinking Planet*, addresses current geopolitical perspectives, that necessarily intersect with matters on resources and sustainability. Some commentators have stressed the relational and dynamic nature of Livi Bacci’s idea of ‘shrinking’ as opposed to other common metaphors that cannot equally account for the complexity of the matter, such the image of a ‘full’ planet (Véron 2018). These dynamic views are expressed by some of Livi Bacci’s key points.

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First, the idea that resources should be understood differently than at Malthus's times: today, the most common global concerns are not about food resources (although the problem of hunger is far from resolved), but rather for the potential depletion of non-renewables such as fossil fuels, and the impact of global activities on climate change. To understand that, Livi Bacci discusses the notion of 'metabolic rate' (Livi Bacci 2017b, 50), that is the level of non-renewable resources' consumption per capita, which can be hugely different if we consider the lifestyle of people living in rich countries and of those living in the poorest ones. Thus, the mere 'number' of people speaks little to matters of sustainability without taking into account consumption and lifestyles.

Second, also the idea of growing (or not) 'global population' has limited meaning if one does not consider the unbalances in age structures and in perspective growth existing between some countries in the 'Global North' and in the 'Global South', potentially sharpened by recent events such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Aasve et al. 2020). Livi Bacci explains this situation through the geographical 'parable of Tycoonina and Pauperia' (Livi Bacci 2017b, 52), two invented countries—but with very real population dynamics, the first corresponding to most Western European countries, the second corresponding to most African countries. In that story, the population of Pauperia will increase by 2% every year while that of Tycoonina will remain stable over the following 35 years, which would imply, for the latter, the social costs of an ageing population as for pensions and healthcare services.

On the other side, assuming that Pauperia will steadily increase its GDP per capita, the pressure of its population over non-renewable resources will be potentially multiplied over the period, always depending on technology (and political willingness) to decrease per-capita use of non-renewables. That is: 'Technological development tends to decouple economic growth from unsustainable means of production and consumption ... with more technology, each extra unit of production or consumption will take up less non-renewable energy and resources' (Livi Bacci 2017b, 52). Again, the impact of population on land is something dynamic that depends on lifestyles and modes of consumption rather than mere numbers. Livi Bacci's argument is that, given that current age pyramids allow for quite affordable estimations of the respective demographic growth and

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degrowth of most countries for the next decades, knowing how the problem will develop should lead to act in advance to tackle the related challenges.

The same can be said as for geopolitical ‘balances of power’. Quoting again classical geopolitical thinkers such as Ratzel, Livi Bacci notes that, in the nineteenth and twentieth century, pro-natality policies were enforced by several authoritarian regimes (including Mussolini’s Italy) considering number as geopolitical power—more soldiers and more workers for industrial production. Although much has changed in the last decades, Livi Bacci argues that the differential growth in neighbouring populations has the potentiality to change geopolitical equilibria as for both localised conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and global balances of (economic, political and military) power between the so-called ‘Western World’ and growing powers such as China, India and other emerging ‘Southern’ countries. Again, for Livi Bacci, the preventive knowledge that geo-demography offers to the relevant governments and public opinions should lead to anticipate these problems, possibly in the sense of developing peace talks and avoiding further ethnic tensions or large-scale conflicts rather than the opposite. Alas, recent history is showing that relevant ‘deciders’ have completely different priorities.

### **Conclusion: for a contextual turn in (critical) geo-demography**

This paper has shown the potentialities of connecting geographic and demographic approaches to apply historical methods to the understanding of current problems. Likewise, it shows the importance for scholars to apply flexible and adaptable models to be constantly verified on different cases considering the degree of ‘unpredictability’ that populational dynamics have and the need for their contextual and historically/geographically situated study. Then, it exposes the need to translate this understanding into political practices, matching the call for relevance expressed by the literature on population geography mentioned above. To this end, a critical historical geo-demography can nourish several agendas in critical geography.

Among these agendas there is the need, widely expressed by Livi Bacci, of challenging Malthusianism without denying the seriousness of the problems that growing populations can

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imply on economic, environmental and social agendas. Hence, the need to carefully consider demographic dynamics and projections in decision-making and in designing public policies. Another key point, especially for postcolonial and decolonial geographies aiming at provincializing Europe (Chakrabarty 2000) is the awareness, exposed in the works of the Italian demographer, of the need to both denounce the historical responsibilities of Europe in the indigenous genocide and to consider its current decline in perspective geopolitical scenarios. For these scenarios, Livi Bacci's ideas on the need for transnational cooperation and integration in decision-making provides arguments for current critical geopolitics deeming the traditional instruments of the nation-state (such as territorial sovereignty) inadequate to address global challenges such as the climate crisis and migrations (Minca 2019).

Finally, while Livi Bacci's warning on the centrality of demographic dynamics leads him to express concerns for the scarce attention that is paid to population and migration in SDGs debates, it does not lead the demographer to catastrophism, but rather to calls for action and for scholars' responsibility toward their civic duties. Importantly, Livi Bacci's ideas that 'science' has to enlighten politics should be never confused with technocracy: while technology is key for improving 'metabolic rates', sensible policies are indispensable to put knowledge into practice. And the history of population shows that no demographic policy is successful without people's will and participation.

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