

Too many of whom, and too much of what?

What the new population hysteria tells us about the global economic and environmental crisis, and its causes

No One Is Illegal

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There is a conventional view in Britain that racism has been driven onto the defensive or even banished completely from most areas of daily life. The political Right, indeed, constantly portrays itself as the victim of “liberal oppression” and “political correctness gone mad”. Yet somehow, racism has won some huge victories in recent years, in all the liberal democracies, with very little opposition, to such an extent that the terms “fortress Britain”, “fortress Europe” and “fortress USA” are now quite normal usage – and, without even needing to be told, everybody understands what these fortifications are for: to stop the poorer, darker-skinned peoples of the world “flooding” into its richer, paler parts.

This transformation has been achieved by a combination of threats of violence from the “shadowy far right”, and “measured”, responsible-sounding rhetoric focusing, relentlessly, on the apparently colour-blind, objective issue of “sheer numbers”. It is “these people’s” numbers, apparently, that demand urgent attention; their numbers are their only human attribute that matters, and this underlies the incessant chant from anti-immigrant pressure groups, like Migration Watch UK, that Britain (for example) is a “tiny, overcrowded island” and from the resurgent far right (BNP, UKIP) that their anti-immigrant politics are “about space, not race”; and the extraordinary, apocalyptic visions of right-wing illuminati like Gunnar Heinsohn and Christopher Caldwell (see below) of a world overrun by rapidly-breeding Muslims.

Being “too many” is a hard, indeed a terrifying, charge for a lone human being to face. It can be applied to anyone. And it will be, increasingly, in all manner of insidious, destructive and even deadly ways, if the current trend to target “sheer human numbers” invades the political mainstream and we have a return to full-blown population politics: an old, prurient politics driven by an itch to control not just the movement of (certain kinds of) people, but also their sex-lives, and their very existence.

Babies of Mass Destruction, resurrected

As recently as the early 1990s, this form of politics had been banished to the moral wilderness and looked unlikely ever to return. It had inflicted unspeakable, and completely futile, injuries on millions upon millions of lives all over the world. And its justification – in so far as it ever had one – was melting away: the global population-explosion of the mid 20th-century was drawing to an end; a trend now so thoroughly established that nobody now disputes it (see “*How frightening are these ‘frightening numbers’?*”, below). The resurgence of population politics instead speaks volumes about the crisis in the global capitalist system. And it puts the issue of human autonomy firmly and urgently in the spotlight.

The core belief of this kind of politics is that there are certain people whose normal, non-criminal activities (like travelling around, or having or not having babies, and other normal activities that people undertake to sustain their own and their families’ continued existence) must be restrained for the common good. These activities may in themselves do no harm but when done en masse, they supposedly become major, even apocalyptic threats.

The No One Is Illegal group insists that these activities can only ever be a matter of personal choice. They are properly termed “reproductive rights”: affecting as they do “**the process by which human beings meet their basic needs and survive from one day to the next.**”¹. All

¹ This is the definition of “reproduction” used by DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) in 1984 – quoted by Matthew Connelly in “Fatal Misconception” p.360 (see endnotes)

efforts to deny that fact and meddle with these choices lead inevitably to needless and useless suffering, and in the end will damage any society that tolerates that impulse to scapegoat and control.

We will argue that identifying yet more scapegoats and subjecting them to yet more controls will absolutely not help us through our economic and ecological crisis. On the contrary, it is these very attitudes to, and abuse of, human beings and their rights, which immigration controls exemplify so perfectly, that brought this crisis about.

Already, many of those now urging population control say that “we” must be prepared to sacrifice some human rights in the face of the greater danger². The prophet of climate change himself, James Lovelock, has even proposed that “*We need another Churchill now to lead us from the clinging, flabby, consensual thinking of the late 20th century*” and “*an effective defence force will be as important as our own immune systems*”³.

We argue that, far from being peripheral “luxuries”, human rights are the key to our global future, the only sure guarantors of social and environmental sustainability.

The crash of October 2008: population-control to the rescue!

Throughout 2008–9, as banks collapsed, credit bubbles imploded, and the reality of climate change penetrated even the innermost comfort-zones of neoliberalism, mainstream media sprouted headlines, leader articles and commissioned features declaring that the real, urgent problem facing the planet is not its economic system, but its human population. Moreover, oppressive “liberals” had turned population into a “taboo subject”, which must be challenged⁴. It is no longer just a matter of controlling people’s movement; it is a matter of controlling their existence.

In October 2008, the UK got a new Immigration Minister, Phil Woolas, who swept the bank bailouts from the front pages, telling the Times: “*This government isn’t going to allow the [UK] population to go up to 70 million.*” Sir Andrew Green, chair of Migration Watch, applauded: “*It is the first time that a government minister has actually linked immigration and population.*”⁵

“Population” seems to touch the nerves immigration alone cannot reach – even those of otherwise-humane Greens and anti-capitalists like Paul Kingsnorth, who shocked fellow-campaigners by saying that Woolas “has a point”, and challenged them “to explain how we can meet our climate change targets with an extra 15 million people here”.⁶

In early 2009, the Optimum Population Trust’s annual conference got headline media billing. Its patron Jonathon Porritt (also an adviser on green issues to UK premier Gordon Brown) announced that “*the UK population must fall to 30m*”⁷ and the world as a whole must somehow

² E.g., “When the world is at stake, personal rights and sovereignty aren’t perfectly clear”; Joseph Chamie; Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, April 18th 2008.

³ Sunday Times, 8/2/09

⁴ e.g. John Feeny: “Population: The elephant in the room” news.bbc.co.uk

⁵ “Immigration to be cut as unemployment soars”; The Times, 18/10/2008: www.timesonline.co.uk

⁶ Paul Kingsnorth; “Immigration: truisms vs cliches”; October 2008: www.paulkingsnorth.net

⁷ The Times, 22/3/09

lose over 3 billion people⁸. In April 2009, Britain's best-loved TV naturalist, David Attenborough, joined the Optimum Population Trust himself, and declared population growth "frightening".

At the same time, and sometimes even in the very same press-releases, came intensified verbal attacks not only on immigrants but also on the long-term sick and the unemployed. In the Sun (December 8th 2008), Woolas's pronouncement that "*Immigrants will have to EARN the right to UK benefits and council housing ... [and] wait TEN YEARS before they get a penny*" sat right next to Work and Pensions Secretary James Purnell's pronouncement that from now on "*nearly all benefit claimants will be forced to work in exchange for state handouts*".

Migrant, criminal, claimant... Nobody's safe in the population game

"Population" is an us-and-them game where anybody can be "it". You don't have to be black. If you become unemployed, or a bit too ill, you may cease to be an individual with rights, and become part of a "population" instead, and a suitable case for "management". In this way, population politics implies the "legalisation" of humanity: the right to be treated as a human being must be *earned*; it is granted by legal authorities; it cannot be acquired lightly, for example by being born, or conceived, or just turning up on one's own unauthorised, autonomous initiative.

It is part of the universal language of raw power. In the UK, the idea of "earned citizenship" already begins to sound quite normal; but it was expressed only a little more strongly by Sudan's ex-premier Sadiq al-Mahdi in the early stages of the Darfur crisis: "The honour of living must be earned"⁹.

When people become mere "population", they can be subjected to what would be called criminal violence in any other context: forced labour; separation from children; arbitrary checks and searches; intrusive interrogation; verbal abuse; even imprisonment and serious assault (especially when the controls become target-driven, as they almost inevitably do).

"Population" separates a worthy, privileged "us" from a despised and indefensible "them", onto whom all unpleasantness can be projected; who can be, and then are, exploited mercilessly, or abandoned, or got rid of in almost any way human ingenuity can devise.

"We" ostensibly embraces all true-born, good-hearted native folk, rich and poor, in thrilling yet cosy opposition to the alien menace. Even the humblest citizen may join this noble project. Or face the consequences. Such is the magic of populist politics, and the road to fascism.

Population politics preserves privilege, but it won't save the planet

Like immigration controls, population control only creates misery for those least able to bear it, and jobs for those who inflict that misery. It pushes the real, genuinely urgent issues off the agenda.

⁸ OPT website: to achieve a 'modest' world footprint the world population needs to be reduced to between 3.4 and 2.7 billion, depending on the provision allowed for biodiversity: www.optimumpopulation.org.

⁹ Attributed to ex-Prime Minister Sadiq al Mahdi by Harry Verhoeven: "War, famine and displacement in Sudan" (Talk given at Exeter College, Oxford, 19/5/2009)

In the past, education, roads, sanitation and proper health-care were denied to people all over the world on the grounds that they distracted from the more urgent “problem” of population. Today, population threatens to become the smokescreen that prevents or delays the concerted, wholehearted global response that’s needed to deal with the causes and effects of climate change. Which would mean facing uncomfortable truths. As population historian Matthew Connelly put it during a BBC Radio 3 discussion of neo-Malthusianism in “today’s crowded world”:

When people say the US or the UK for that matter is overpopulated I want to ask them which people in particular they have in mind, who are in and of themselves a problem?

If the problem is *consumption*, then of course it’s the *wealthiest* people we need fewer of. I mean, Britain would do much better if it had 100 million subsistence farmers, say, than 50 million people who are doctors and lawyers and bankers and so on. It could have much less of a carbon footprint if it imported subsistence farmers from the Sahel, and exported bankers and lawyers to Africa. But nobody is proposing that!¹⁰

A war on the poor of all countries, by the rich of all countries: Eugenics, Malthusians and Populists Vs mothers, babies and migrants.

Since it first became a political force in the 19th century, the professed aims of population control have changed constantly: to protect scarce food supplies; to promote “racial hygiene” and improve the species; to preserve “our culture and values”; to protect wildlife and the environment; to assist the “development” of ex-colonial countries; and now to save the planet itself. It has never achieved had any significant effect on human numbers – but it has been consistently and superbly effective at preventing action on other fronts, especially redistribution from the rich to the poor. Its agenda is not merely racist, but also (and even more) “classist”. Immigrant-control may be dressed up, for popular consumption, in nationalist colours; but when it comes to controlling parents and babies, the real nature of the game becomes very clear: class trumps mere nationality. Population-control targets “our own” poor as well as those in “poor countries” (and with enthusiastic support from those “poor countries” own rich elites).

Some very unattractive obsessions lie at its heart, especially a preoccupation with other people’s sex lives – especially of “the poor”. It is all about who “belongs to” whom. In the USA for example, fears about the fertility of black, brown and Asian people go hand in hand with fear of declining fertility among “our own” (i.e. white) women, and moral crusades against abortion (but also moral panics about teenage sex, “welfare moms”, and assisted and surrogate pregnancy).

Hard-line Republican Tom DeLay made the connection clear in 2007: “*If we had those 40 million children that were killed over the last 30 years [by abortion], we wouldn’t need the illegal immigrants to fill the jobs that they are doing today.*”¹¹ Similar rhetoric emerges in Berlusconi’s Italy, and in the UK – where anti-abortion (and anti-assisted pregnancy) MP Frank Field has joined forces

¹⁰ BBC Radio 3 Nightwaves, Wednesday 19 March 2008

¹¹ Quoted by Priscilla Huang; “10 Reasons to Rethink the Immigration-Overpopulation Connection”; *DifferenTakes* 59, Spring 2009; popdev.

with Migration Watch and its co-founder, long-serving pillar of the Eugenics Society, Professor David Coleman, who consistently argues that immigration must be resisted in favour of utilising “domestic demographic reserves” (increasing “labour force participation” by raising the retirement age, less-generous pension provision, and other measures) and encouraging motherhood: “fertility offers a much more efficient lever on the age structure than does immigration”.¹²

The pressure works its way right down the global pecking order. In the poorest parts of China and India (where one- and two-child policies are still being enforced) the brutal logic of poverty makes sons vital to a family’s survival. In India in 1960, a working-class woman needed to have 6.3 babies to be sure of having one son who survived to adulthood. Thanks to relatively cheap, handheld doppler-scanners girl-foetuses can now be detected, and the mother comes under pressure to abort. This has led to skewed gender-ratios: in India 927 girls per 1,000 boys overall and as few as 716 per 1,000 in Delhi – and utter devastation for untold thousands of women. By way of a final twist to the knife, the surfeit of young men is blamed by fashionable Western analysts for civil unrest and terrorism (letting poverty, socially destructive neoliberal reforms and Western intervention off the hook).¹³ The influential German sociologist and columnist Gunnar Heinsohn even blames the ongoing crises in Palestine on the Palestinians’ failure to control their own birth-rates.¹⁴ They should be denied aid, he says, till they have taken this problem in hand.

But why do otherwise sane, decent people buy this politics? Of course, there is the fear that “they might, just have a point” (global warming, at least, is a real threat, and humanity – or at least, some of it – is definitely implicated). But why (even if sheer human numbers actually were the problem) do otherwise-decent people support policies that inflict cruelty that they would never in a million years dream of perpetrating themselves? Dubious “lifeboat” metaphors are sometimes invoked to justify cruelty. Yet in actual life-or-death situations, people very often put their shared humanity above personal survival, even if that means there will be no survivors.¹⁵

A 200-year war against welfare

Population-control made its political debut in early 19th century Britain, when Thomas Malthus’s theory of population growth¹⁶ gave exactly the moral insulation Britain’s rising middle class needed against the terrible poverty that tore through the country during the economic slump and restructuring that followed the Napoleonic Wars. Malthus’s arguments were used to drive through the New Poor Law of 1834, which attempted to imprison in the workhouse anyone improvident enough to claim welfare. The workhouse system, which took decades to dismantle, presaged in some detail today’s anti-immigrant system: notably its distinction

¹² David Coleman; “‘Replacement Migration’, or why everyone’s going to have to live in Korea”; Galton Institute Newsletter, March 2001. David Coleman and Robert Rowthorn; “The Economic Effects of Immigration into the United Kingdom”; *Population and Development Review* 30/4, Dec 2004).

¹³ e.g. by Valerie M. Hudson and Andrea M. den Boer in “Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia’s Surplus Male Population” – critiqued by Betsy Hartmann in “The Testosterone Threat: Sociobiology, National Security and Population Control”; *DifferenTakes* 41, Fall 2006; popdev.

¹⁴ Gunnar Heinsohn; “Why Gaza is fertile ground for angry young men”; *Financial Times*: June 14 2007

¹⁵ For more on human altruism, see Robert Axelrod, “The Evolution of Co-operation”; Basic Books 1984.

¹⁶ Malthus first published *An Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798, revised and expanded it in 1803, and several further editions till his death in 1834. He asserts that: “Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison with the second.”

between “deserving and undeserving”, and its parallel, unaccountable, cut-price policing and judicial system.

The Malthusian argument goes: not only is there no point in relieving the starving poor (if fed, they will only breed more, negating our good efforts); it would also be *wrong and unkind* to feed them: by encouraging them to breed, we will end up overwhelming the very resources on which they depend for help. So, conveniently, the kindest thing is to let them starve. This “cruel to be kind” rationale permeates all kinds of population and anti-welfare politics and, in its more general form, ‘the perversity thesis’, plays a key role in reactionary politics in general¹⁷.

Modern population politics (in the full, broad sense: targeting immigrants as well as babies) took shape fairly rapidly during the el-Niño famine years of the 1870s. For the first time, people all over the world suddenly had to contend not only with a run of bad harvests, but also with imperialism. The result was spectacular famines right across the global South – and instead of compassion, it was the nightmare vision of “starving multitudes” that seized Western imaginations. Starving people somehow acquired supernatural powers, to cross vast distances en masse and invade suburbia. The hysteria was fuelled and rationalised by a deadly brew of Malthusian theory plus Francis Galton’s theories of inheritance¹⁹ (which he named “eugenics” in 1882), evoking the spectre of a world overrun by greedy, oversexed morons.

Malthus personally helped shape the deadly British response to the crisis in India: he’d trained many colonial administrators at the East India Company’s Haileybury staff college. As in Ireland thirty years previously, large amounts of high-quality food were exported while people starved, and forced-labour masqueraded as “relief”¹⁸.

Matthew Connelly describes a “surge of creativity in elaborating and theorizing the threat”. An 1877 US House/Senate committee “asserted that although the Chinese lacked sufficient ‘brain capacity’ to sustain self-government, they could survive in conditions that would starve other men ... the American must come down to their level or below them.” First, the Page Law of 1875 banned women from China seeking to join their husbands in the U.S. Then, in 1882, came the US Chinese Exclusion Act: the first of a global epidemic of exclusionary laws and populist politics, one of whose hallmarks was an indulgent attitude toward racist violence. Riots in the US against Chinese and Italian immigrants in the 1880s were excused by politicians as “*the working people’s way of demonstrating their citizenship*”. Riots against Jews in Germany in 1886 were excused as “*but the public method of voicing the sentiment ‘no rights without duties’*”¹⁹ – which is echoed today in discourse about “earned citizenship”.

Alberto Alesina and Edward Glaeser argue that this “populist turn” in US politics (identifying excluded, disadvantaged groups as the enemy) explains the USA’s otherwise puzzling failure to develop a social security system for its citizens²⁰. Now, in the hands of Christopher Caldwell, David Goodhart and their ilk, a cart-before-horse version of this argument is used to promote fear of foreigners (that large out-groups destroy the social cohesion that underpins welfare states).

¹⁷ The “perversity thesis”, described by Albert O. Hirschman in *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (Harvard 1991), states that if you try to improve things you will inevitably make things worse.

¹⁸ see Connelly; also Mike Davis, “Late Victorian Holocausts”.

¹⁹ Connelly, pp 34–36

²⁰ *Fighting poverty in the US and Europe: a world of difference*, by Alberto Alesina and Edward L. Glaeser, 2004

Population reduction: separating the good Americans from the nasty Nazis

In the 20th century, the worldwide population control movement entered enthusiastically into eugenic nationalism; but after World War II distanced itself from “Nazi excesses”, and successfully portrayed as something quite different the postwar campaigns inflicted in the name of “development” on people in Asia, Africa and the Americas.

Nazi genocide was certainly different in many ways from subsequent population-control campaigns, although its legal and administrative foundations, the 1933 sterilization laws and tribunal system, were taken from the USA: the Model Eugenical Sterilization Law drafted in 1922 and adopted in many individual states. What is more the genocide should have taught “respectable” population-controllers an important lesson: the systematic, industrialised, outright murder of millions of Jews, Russians and others had surprisingly little long-term effect on their numbers. Russia’s population for example certainly fell between 1941 and 1945 (from 197 million to 171 million) but had recovered by 1960, whereafter growth steadied through the 1960s and 1970s, reflecting the rapid improvements in health and education²¹.

The 20th century’s main population-control action was the work of a strange alliance of totally unaccountable NGOs, composed of birth-control pioneers (often with eugenicist agendas) and independently-wealthy, male population-control enthusiasts like John D. Rockefeller, the disposable paper-cup millionaire Hugh Moore, and the unspeakable Clarence Gamble (heir to the Procter and Gamble soap empire) whose attitude to Indian villagers was described by one local civil servant as “they are all natives and sex to him”²².

After World War II, the movement gained increasingly generous funding and influence (especially from the US government and the World Bank). Even the UN was enlisted, after intense lobbying that led to the setting-up of the uniquely-unaccountable UN Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), which then served as a conduit for largely US funds. Blatant, amateur experimentation was inflicted on millions upon millions of poor people in India, China, Indonesia, Korea and throughout Africa involving millions of – in effect – forcible sterilizations, abortions, untested and even unsterile intra-uterine devices (IUDs), implants, injections and pills. Poor populations in rich countries were also targeted: Appalachia, and black areas of US cities – where the experimental hormone implant Norplant was promoted as “a tool in the fight against black poverty”, and even made a precondition for welfare²³. Population-control dominated the development-aid agenda. During Lyndon Johnson’s presidency, and Robert McNamara’s tenure of the presidency of the World Bank, it became orthodoxy that \$5 “invested” in birth control was worth \$100 invested in economic growth²⁴. Aid was routinely made conditional on the introduction of dramatic population-control programmes, which took priority over even the most basic health provision.

It was a global war – described as such – almost entirely waged by rich, white men on poor black and Asian women; often by actual generals such as the USA’s General William Draper and China’s Xinzhong Qian; macho, military language was the norm: “attacking the problem at the post-partum stage” (persuading mothers to accept sterilization immediately after delivery) and “deploying crack troops” to raise acceptance rates. Population-control propagandists such

²¹ R.W. Davies; “Soviet Economic Development from Lenin to Khrushchev”; Cambridge University Press, 1998.

²² Connelly, pp 173–4

²³ Hartmann, pp 211–212

²⁴ Hartmann p 104

as Paul Ehrlich entered into the spirit of it all; he urged “logistic support in the form of helicopters, vehicles and surgical instruments” and condemned the US government for not insisting on compulsory sterilization for all Indian men with 3 or more children²⁵.

This war was of course fought with “military precision” – with all the ghastly errors and cavalier attitude to them we associate with that phrase, and the same perverse “reverse-precautionary principle” we find in immigration-control regimes: if in doubt, do harm. The literature is littered with statements like “Whether you like it or not, there will be a few dead people”²⁶. Anything went: Connelly found that identical reports had somehow been sold by the Population Council’s jet-setting consultants to Kenya in 1965 and then to Iran in 1966, with only a single paragraph changed in the covering letter²⁷.

And there were plenty of casualties. During Indira Gandhi’s ambitious, target-driven campaigns in India, homes were bulldozed for non-compliance and in the last 6 months of 1976 6.5 million people were sterilized, many of them forcibly, and “hundreds if not thousands died from infections”²⁸.

In 1977, to her great surprise, Gandhi was ejected from office by an outraged electorate: the beginning of mass-resistance to the policy, which would culminate in partial victory at the 1994 UN Cairo “population summit” – after which population-control became a tar-baby no respectable politician would touch. Organisations that had backed coercion transformed themselves into champions of autonomy overnight.

Others changed their names. The American Eugenics Society became the Society for the Study of Social Biology; *Eugenics Quarterly* became *Social Biology*. In the UK, in 1988, the Eugenics Society renamed itself The Galton Institute.

Unreal numbers with all-too-real consequences

Population politics loves to present itself as scientifically objective (as if this somehow makes wrecking other people’s lives less objectionable). It becomes fixated on targets, which become conditionalities for foreign aid (and a myriad other things including jobs, housing and performance bonuses) which inexorably ends up with coercion “in the field”. Conditionality ends up starving other public services of resources. In South Africa, family-planning became the only free, health-related service available to non-whites (and a compulsory precondition for jobs and homes).

It was a similar picture all over Africa and south-east Asia. In Bangladesh, terrible levels of perinatal mortality went unaddressed in the 1980s, while aid agencies objected even to the provision of rehydration salts for diarrhea because they considered it diverted attention away from family planning²⁹.

Infantile reverence for “hard figures” blinded the population-controllers to reality. In 1989, Nigeria was forced by the World Bank into a ‘structural adjustment’ programme contingent on a massive birth-control programme that then consumed far more resources than the entire Health

²⁵ Hartmann, p 252

²⁶ A director of family planning in Maharashtra, quoted in Connelly p321

²⁷ Connelly pp 233–4

²⁸ Hartmann, p 252

²⁹ Hartmann p 236

Ministry – only to discover in the 1992 census that the population had been overestimated by between 20 and 30 million³⁰.

And throughout the history of population politics tentative projections have been treated as “scientific predictions”. In 1965 the UK government projected that by 2000 the British population would be 75 million: 5 million more than the ‘alarming’ 70 million now projected for 2050 (Aaronovitch, 9/9/08³¹). Projections for world population have varied even more wildly – yet have been treated as firm predictions, and used to ramp up a fever of anxiety in which almost any coercion begins to seem acceptable. In his 1968 best-seller, *The Population Bomb*, Paul Ehrlich predicted that there would be global famine in the 1970s and hundreds of millions of deaths. Twenty years earlier, UNESCO’s first director, Julian Huxley had been urging the use of atomic weapons “to keep down the colored peoples”³².

As Connelly says:

Too often, alas, population projections are psychological projections ... not that there are too many people but that there are certain kinds of people, with whom we feel uncomfortable, who there are too many of.

How frightening are these “frightening numbers”?

So far, so ghastly. But does that mean that the population-controllers were wrong to be concerned about population growth? Population did, indeed, rise at an astonishing rate in the years after World War II – largely due to falling death rates. But birth rates were also starting to decline – even in countries that hadn’t been subjected to the campaigns. UN Population Division (UNPD) data show almost identical rates of decline between 1950 and 2000 both in countries that had been subjected to “strong birth-control”, and in ones that hadn’t. *“It turns out that about 90 percent of the difference in fertility rates worldwide derived from something very simple and very stubborn: whether women themselves wanted more or fewer children.”*³³

The “Population Crisis” seems to be one of those persuasive illusions that somehow seem to become all the more convincing the more they fail to come true. No famine has ever, it seems, been caused by overpopulation. The evidence for environmental damage is similarly weak (see below). But maybe, like the one roulette number that’s failed to come up all night, the hour really is nigh, at last, when these fears will be justified. We are in new times after all: the oil really is running out, and climate-change is a stark and quite unprecedented reality.

World population was approximately 6.8 billion in 2008³⁴ and expected to plateau in mid-century at around 8.9 billion, staying at around that level till 2300 or beyond³⁵. This is a projection, not a prediction, but even the Optimum Population Trust accepts that it is probably about right: birth rates are falling and have been doing so for a long time, in more and more countries.

³⁰ Hartmann p 127

³¹ “Like house prices, immigration could fall too”, David Aaronovitch, *The Times*, 9/9/2008. www.timesonline.co.uk

³² Connelly p 121

³³ Connelly p 373

³⁴ *World Population Prospects, The 2008 Revision*; UNPD 2009.

³⁵ UNPD (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division); “World Population to 2300”, 2004.

The trend to lower birth rates began as long ago as the early 19th century, in France after the Napoleonic Wars (incidentally, without modern contraceptives). By 1918 it was a Europe-wide phenomenon and governments were panicking that there would not be enough soldiers for future wars – hence the ‘natalist’ policies of Hitler, Mussolini and others, to encourage large families, while *outlawing* birth-control. These campaigns failed just as miserably as more recent population-reduction campaigns; in Italy’s case, birth-rates fell despite the intimate and persistent attentions of a fascist state and the Roman Catholic Church. Today, 70 countries’ fertility is below replacement level (2.1 children per couple). As early as 2025, global fertility will probably have fallen to replacement level³⁶.

Certainly, 8.9 billion is a lot of people. It may seem an “alarming figure” – but by what criterion? Billions of people do not take up as much space as the alarmist picture suggests: at present, the world’s entire human population would all fit into former Yugoslavia at the same population density as Manhattan – which is not a bad place to live, and has quite a bit of open space; too little for self-sufficiency but excellent for providing services and limiting energy-use.

And self-sufficiency should not present a problem. Most or even all Chinese cities were “completely self-sufficient in food production” until the market reforms of the 1980s (and even into the early 1990s³⁷). Till the mid-1990s, Shanghai, which had a population of over 13 million at the time, was largely self-sufficient in vegetables and grain³⁸. So, at the same population-density as Shanghai (2,588 people per square kilometre), the current world population should be able to feed itself perfectly well within a land area a little smaller than the Democratic Republic of Congo. For comparison, DRC’s total land-area, 2.35 million km², is less than a fifth of the earth’s currently-cultivated area – 13.6 million km² – which is itself capable of considerable expansion³⁹).

So where do these predictions of disaster come from. How do they gain such credibility? And why does the world seem so overcrowded to so many people?

Part of the answer is that there are, as Connelly suggests, too many rich people. The “tiny overcrowded island” of Britain would indeed be rather small if its wealthy landowners upped sticks and went, taking their private estates with them. It’s hard to say exactly how small – “Who owns Britain” is one of the world’s great mysteries – but half of it has been held in private hands since long before records began. And if Britain’s entire population had to live within the same constraints (an area 200 x 200 metres) as the young, low-income men interviewed in a 2008 Rowntree Foundation report we would all fit into the Isle of Man. For similar reasons, even Brazil is a “tiny overcrowded island”, as far as a great many of its citizens are concerned.

³⁶ UNPD, p 32

³⁷ Jennifer Pepall; “New Challenges for China’s Urban Farmers” IDRC Reports, Vol 21, No 3, Oct 1993idrinfor.idrc.ca farming and urban activity is typical of Chinese cities, each of which is completely self-sufficient in food production.” ... “A 1953 study shows that by the early 1930s, Shanghai was able to feed its three million people with food produced within a 100-km radius. The Chinese government has built on this concept of self-sufficiency to keep pace with a growing urban population.”

³⁸ Peter Newman and Isabella Jennings; “Cities as Sustainable Ecosystems”; Island Press 2008

³⁹ World Bank data from nationmaster.com. See also Joel Cohen; “How many people can the earth support?”, Norton, 1995, p177 and 186.

Some facts about famine

Some people have always been quick to blame famines on overpopulation but whenever the facts of any particular famine are examined it always turns out that starvation was not caused by any actual shortage of food.

The Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen has shown that in every single famine for which records exist, there has always in fact been a surplus of food. Meat and grain continued to be exported right through the Irish famine of the 1840s, in India, China and Peru in the 1870s; and there were surpluses in East Bengal in the 1940s. The problem has always been one of distribution: the food was there, but it wasn't getting to the poor; they'd been priced out of the market, so they died⁴⁰.

Overpopulation has even been blamed for the Ethiopian famine of the 1980s – yet Ethiopia is sparsely-populated, has an abundance of arable land, much of it still unused, and produces surpluses even in times of drought⁴¹.

It is said that, even though people may not have run up against the earth's "carrying capacity" in the past, they are bound to do so soon, as global warming causes sea-levels to rise. But it is hard to see how even worst-case scenarios could cause such a thing. At present, vast (and growing) areas of arable land are still being diverted to raising cattle for the unhealthy, high-meat/junk food diets of the developed world. 50% of the world's wheat and barley, 80% of its maize and 90% of its soya are fed to livestock. "By 2050, when the human population numbers 9 billion" says ecologist Colin Tudge⁴² "our livestock will be consuming enough good grain and pulses to feed another 4 billion." Meanwhile, we already throw away enough food to feed most of the current world population: up to half of all food sold in the UK and USA goes to landfill. Huge amounts of good-quality arable land are still being given over to speculative housing, covered with roads, with golf-courses (which now use enough water every day to meet the needs of 4.7 billion people⁴³) or simply fenced off by landowners to protect privacy, or to stop other people using it.

Even if the world population reaches 9 billion and sea levels rise as predicted, there should still be no excuse for anyone to live any other way than well – if we plan things properly (i.e., treat each other as if we were equally human). Tudge concludes that feeding the world "should be eminently do-able, even in the face of global warming and diminishing oil".

But what about the environment?

It is said that "too many people" inevitably cause environmental degradation. This has been a major theme of the population-control movement since environmentalism itself. The USA's leading environmental organisation, the Sierra Club, played an important part in ramping up the hysteria when it published Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, in 1968. Major birth-control campaigns have been launched specifically to protect the environment. The showcase for this effort should be Puerto Rico, testbed for US birth-control agencies and contraceptive pill and implant manufacturers for decades. One third of all Puerto Rican women had been sterilized

⁴⁰ Sen, A. K. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford ; New York, Oxford University Press.

⁴¹ Girma Kebede – *Cycles of famine in a country of plenty: The case of Ethiopia* (GeoJournal, July, 1988)

⁴² Tudge, C. (2007). *Feeding people is easy*. Paris.

⁴³ David Molden; *Solution for the World's Water Woes*; BBC "Green Room" article, retrieved March 2009

by 1968. But today Puerto Rico has one of the most polluted environments in South America – thanks not to its population but to the activities of US oil companies⁴⁴.

Population is blamed for the the destruction of tropical rain-forests, and this has been used to justify brutal population control campaigns throughout Indonesia and the Philippines. Meanwhile, the forests in each case were sold for export over the people’s heads by (respectively) the Suharto and Marcos dictatorships. And these weren’t one-off, freak events.

In 1997–98 forest fires claimed 8 million hectares in South-East Asia, mainly in Indonesia, whose government immediately blamed indigenous people and peasant farmers; satellite evidence however showed that the overwhelming majority of the fires had started on large-scale plantations, often belonging to multinationals, using burn-off to clear land cheaply⁴⁵.

In the Philippines, the environmental destruction has accelerated since Marcos. Describing the havoc wrought by western mining companies, ex-UK aid minister Clare Short says: *“I have never seen anything so systematically destructive. The environmental effects are catastrophic, as are the effects on people’s livelihoods. They take the tops off mountains, which are holy, they destroy the water sources and make it impossible to farm.”*⁴⁶

Today in West Papua (illegally occupied and exploited by the Indonesian army, which largely finances itself by this kind of entrepreneurship) vast areas of pristine forest are being cleared, along with the people who live there and care for it, to make way for bio-fuel crops. Amnesty International estimates that one-sixth of the population has been killed to facilitate the destruction.

Brazil’s rainforest is being destroyed by a deadly combination of large-scale, export-oriented agribusiness, grotesquely unequal land-distribution, aid-backed roadbuilding schemes (e.g. the Pan-American Highway) and a policy of resettling the poor in the forests as an alternative to land reform⁴⁷. What’s more, the destruction began in earnest well after Brazil’s birth-rates had started to fall (which they did without population-control campaigns).

In Kenya, deforestation is the result of decades of structural adjustment programmes that sacrificed self-sufficient peasant agriculture for large-scale tea-plantations and game-parks, “with the family woodlots grubbed up to plant tea and the hills all around denuded for firewood”.⁴⁸

In addition, it’s estimated that a fifth of all environmental degradation globally is due to military and related activities⁴⁹.

The problem is neither human numbers nor human nature, but human inequality

“The great irony,” says Betsy Hartmann, “is that in most cases population growth comes down faster the less you focus on it as a policy priority, and the more you focus on women’s rights and basic human needs.”⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Hartmann p 248

⁴⁵ Friends of the Earth: Briefing on Indonesian Forest Fires, 1997 (updated 2002)

⁴⁶ Quoted by John Vidal; “We are fighting for our lives and our dignity”; The Guardian, 13/6/2009

⁴⁷ Hartmann, Reproductive Rights and Wrongs, p. 27

⁴⁸ Wangari Maathai interviewed by John Vidal, Guardian, Saturday 30 May 2009.

⁴⁹ Hartmann, p 26

⁵⁰ Hartmann, p 303

If even a fraction of the energy that's been put into population-control rhetoric were to be spent examining the detailed record and achievements of the population-control movement, it would collapse like a house of cards; indeed, it has almost done that on a number of occasions already. It is a highly dangerous distraction from the world's real problems, which are now becoming globally life-threatening.

When a population "explodes" (or collapses) it indicates that the people's lives have been made precarious. The British population explosion of the 18th-19th century happened among a traumatised people, made suddenly dependent on their, and their children's wage-labour. This "development model" was subsequently inflicted on the rest of the world, and still hasn't finished playing out.

Population can, of course, also collapse if people are pushed hard enough. To some extent, the decline is due to an insecure, high working-hours, high-cost existence: experienced both by slum-dwellers in Rio and by young professionals in London and Paris.

But when people's security is restored, normality is soon restored. In recent decades, it has become possible to observe the process almost in real time: in Costa Rica, population-growth had levelled off after the creation of a welfare state, but took off again after 1975, when its welfare state was scrapped⁵¹, as it also did in Sri Lanka (under pressure from the World Bank) after 1977, and for the same reason. In China (whose one-child policy was lauded by Western population-controllers) birth-rates were falling well before the policy was instituted. But then in the 1980s came the market reforms and sudden loss of security for millions.

However, where equality prevails, humans and their environments thrive. Examples include present-day Cuba: the only country in the world that meets its UN Human Development targets within a sustainable ecological footprint and where health outcomes are better in most respects than in the USA, but without the USA's massive environmental cost⁵².

Of course, we think it would be very difficult to run capitalism without "volunteering" significant numbers (a majority, in fact) of humanity to *untermensch* status. But that is a problem for the capitalists to solve, not ours. If they can find a way of doing capitalism in which "we" really does mean "all of us" and "equality" means just that, we will welcome it with open arms: they will have achieved socialism.

Till then we must resist all their attempts to distract attention from their foul-ups by pitting "us" against "them".

The problems that the population-controllers blame on the poor are much more readily attributable to the rich. It is the rich, overwhelmingly, whose overconsumption drives environmental degradation and global warming. It is not just the impact of all those cars, houses and plane journeys, but also of the work that the world's poor are increasingly obliged to do, supplying their needs and whims; and the natural resources that are required to satisfy those needs and whims; and the devastation that's needed and the wars that have to be fought to secure those resources. And so on. So "it can be said with confidence that the world's richest people cause emissions thousands of times that of the world's poorest"⁵³.

According to Danny Dorling:

⁵¹ Hartmann, p 293

⁵² WWF Living Planet Report, 2006

⁵³ J. Timmons Roberts; "Global Inequality and Climate Change"; *Society and Natural Resources*, 14:501 – 509, 2001

it is almost certainly an underestimate to claim that the richest tenth of the world's population have a greater negative environmental impact than all the rest put together. [...] And, of the richest 10th of the world's population, the richest 10th consume more, even than the other half a billion or so affluent⁵⁴.

1 percent of the world's population is a very tiny, irresponsible minority. It would take very little oppression to resolve the problems they create, and of a very much milder nature than the sheer cruelty visited on poor people, in vain attempts to stop them migrating and having babies.

The whole population-control bandwagon looks very much like a cheap and cowardly getout to avoid confronting that inconsiderate, but unfortunately rather powerful, few.

Major sources:

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- Fatal Misconception: the struggle to control world population; Matthew Connelly; Belknap Press, Harvard 2008;
- The website of the Population and Development Institute (Popdev) at Hampshire College, Amherst, Mass. popdev.hampshire.edu

⁵⁴ Danny Dorling, personal communication 28/9/2007, citing Worldmapper.org and WWF Living Planet Report data. See also Dorling; "Injustice: why inequality persists" (Policy Press, April 2010).

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