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Resist Malthusian Coercion

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Population Debate Revisited](#)

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“Population” is hardly an invisible elephant in the room. Malthusianism, along with its modern-day variants, is a dominant ideology taught in schools across the US and many other parts of the world as well. It is prevalent in media, international policy, and philanthropic and environmental circles. While this may not have been Ian Lowe’s [intention](#), the notion that Malthusianism is somehow taboo is a well-worn strategy to gain attention and paint its critics as either ignorant or devious deniers. A similar tendency is to claim that Malthusianism is not racist and to criticize those who say otherwise for taking a cheap shot. But like a major river, racism continues to carve and shape the population landscape, reinforcing racialized stereotypes of over-breeding women, violent young men, and immigrant hordes. Just look at the images and photographs that accompany many articles on population and the environment. Today, Africans are the main targets of these stereotypes.

Like other critical contributors to this conversation, I believe Malthusianism has little basis in fact and serves primarily to obscure capitalist and colonialist relations of production and exchange, deep inequalities in wealth and power, racism and sexism, wars and militarism, and the economic and political stranglehold of the fossil fuel industry. These are the primary drivers of poverty, environmental degradation, violence, and climate change.

Malthusianism also distorts how we understand population dynamics. For example, IPAT’s level of abstraction conceals more than it reveals. P stands in for population size, while demographic dynamics entail so much more: population density and distribution to start with, along with gender, race, class, and age considerations.

And lest we get overly apocalyptic about the demographic future, it is important to remember that birth rates have been declining steadily for many decades; the total fertility rate now averages 2.4 children per woman. Although pockets of high fertility still exist, the main reason world population will likely grow by 2 to 3 billion more people before it stabilizes is that such a large portion of the population in the Global South is young and approaching child-bearing age. Over time, this “demographic momentum” will peter out as the present large generation of young people gets older and birth rates continue to decline worldwide. The task at hand is to plan for a larger global population in environmentally sustainable and socially equitable ways. Given that over half the world’s people now live in cities, investments in carbon-neutral, non-polluting forms of public transport and housing are key.

As a longtime reproductive rights and women’s health advocate, I strongly support people’s access to safe, voluntary, and accessible contraception and abortion services and therefore oppose linking family planning to population control imperatives. As Lowe rightly points out, there is a long and sordid history of coercive population control measures, including China’s one-child policy, one of the worst human rights abuses of the late twentieth century. (It is worth pointing out that many in the international population field initially supported the policy.)

It is naïve, however, to think that today family planning and population control can be joined together in a win-win non-coercive synergy. For example, the research of public health scholar Leigh Senderowicz in Sub-Saharan Africa shows that “despite narratives about empowering women through contraception, global family planning programs are evaluated primarily by their ability to increase contraceptive uptake and reduce fertility in the developing world.” The result is a spectrum of coercive practices at the provider level, including “biased or directive counseling, dramatically limited contraceptive method mix, scare tactics, provision of false medical information, refusal to remove provider-dependent methods, and the non-consented provision of long-acting methods.” As she and other researchers argue, the instrumentalization of women’s bodies to serve population control goals undermines the provision of good quality, rights-based family planning and reproductive health services. Population control is counterproductive, in other words.¹

For decades now, reproductive rights and women's health advocates have opposed the instrumentalization of women's bodies by both the population control establishment and the anti-abortion movement, including the Vatican. The family planning reforms achieved at the 1994 UN Population Conference in Cairo were largely the product of a long struggle by the international women's health movement against both these powerful forces. This fact has not been adequately acknowledged.

One final point: This is a very dangerous moment to be promoting the resurgence of Malthusianism and accompanying overpopulation alarmism. The manifestos of the white supremacist killers in Christchurch, El Paso, and Buffalo reference overpopulation in their hateful arguments against immigrants. Increasingly, the Far Right is wielding Malthusian fears about the environment and climate change to promote its anti-immigrant and eugenic racial purity agenda to a wider environmental audience. This has long been the strategy of the US-based network of population and environment groups organized by John Tanton, such as Numbers USA, Carrying Capacity Network, the Center for Immigration Studies, and Federation for American Immigration Reform.

At a time when many environmental groups are seriously reckoning with their racist pasts, including their previous embrace of the "population bomb," it behooves the Great Transition Initiative to make a definitive break with Malthusianism and to take a strong stand against the very real threat posed by ecofascism.

Endnotes

1. Leigh Senderowicz, "I Was Obligated to Accept': A Qualitative Exploration of Contraceptive Coercion," *Social Science and Medicine* 239 (2019).

About the Author



Betsy Hartmann is Professor Emerita of Development Studies at Hampshire College. She is the author of *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control* and *The America Syndrome: Apocalypse, War and Our Call to Greatness*, co-author of *A Quiet Violence: View from a Bangladesh Village*, and co-editor of the anthology *Making Threats: Biofears and Environmental Anxieties*. Her research, public speaking, and advocacy focus on the nexus between reproductive rights, population, environment, climate, migration, and security. She has consulted for the United Nations Environment Program and UN Women, and in spring 2015 was a Fulbright-Nehru Distinguished Chair in New Delhi, India. She holds a PhD from the London School of Economics.

About the Publication

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