

Population Control: An Unnecessary Evil

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There is currently an intense debate about the impact of humans on the environment and the sustainability of our population numbers. The popular conception of the evidence is that planet Earth has, or soon will have, too many residents. This view also foresees that the inevitable consequences will also include mass starvation and increasing violence unless we drastically reduce the number of people. This position, of course, raises both economic issues as well as ethical problems. The realities of the situation are far different. Theories used to support population control schemes are based on faulty reasoning, flawed evidence, improper understanding of humans, and a large dose of hatred for humanity. In this paper, I argue that there is no need for either serious concern about our numbers or for programs designed to eradicate large segments of the world population.

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Introduction

It is a rather frightening idea when first examined: a population explosion will deplete resources and cause mass famine, starvation, wars, and death. With population numbers at a magnitude that is normally only discussed in relation to either astronomical distances or government debt, it is easy to believe drastic measures are required. When combined with warnings of anthropogenic global warming, the problem is compounded. As experts concluded in a recent conference report: “Unchecked population growth is speeding climate change, damaging life-nurturing ecosystems and dooming many countries to poverty.”¹ The conference report was published by the Royal Society and featured experts making such claims as “[t]here is no doubt that the current rate of human population growth is unsustainable” and “[c]ontinued rapid population growth in many of the least developed countries could lead to hunger, a failure of education and conflict.”²

In the face of such terrible prospects, some have suggested desperate measures. The solutions recommended may vary in their degrees of coerciveness, violence, or general offensiveness to human dignity, but each one of them is a form of population control. All suggestions assume that we have too many people and that some people have to be eliminated. Having the least pull when it comes to voting in the matter, the losers generally are the unborn, especially those in third world countries. Methods proposed range from the more drastic: forced sterilization and abortion³ to “education,” access to contraceptives, legal abortion on demand, and the “empowerment” of women⁴ along with changing cultural attitudes in countries with high birth rates to ones more suitable to “sustainable” population. Instead of the gifts from God and

miracle that they are, children are seen as future waves of a parasitic infestation of humans, a cancer on planet Earth.⁵

Early Modern Population Control: Errors Take Root

In 1798, Thomas Malthus published his famous work *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, which really began the modern population control movement. Malthus begins by proposing two postulates: one, that food is required for man's survival; and "[t]hat the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state."⁶ Malthus' next statement is that population growth will outpace the ability of the earth to produce food.⁷ He realizes that "[p]opulation, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio."⁸ In conclusion, Malthus states that "the effects of these two unequal powers must be kept equal."⁹ In order to accomplish this, he calls for a "strong and constantly operating check on population."¹⁰

Malthus' proposal failed for a number of reasons. He was unable to foresee the consequences of the Industrial Revolution and the Green Revolution. At a deeper level, Malthus did not recognize that a human was more than a mouth to feed. Not only can we reduce our rate of population growth, but we can also work on the other side of the problem: food. In the years since Malthus' essay, we have obtained and fed a population at a level that Malthus would have found unbelievable. As Rothbard points out, population generally rises in response to improvements in living standards; a larger population is a sign of prosperity.¹¹ Also, as countries have developed, fertility rates have tended to decline on their own. Malthus was simply unaware of this fact, so his dire warnings were unfounded.

Later, after it became obvious that his predictions had failed to materialize, Malthus seems to have realized that humans are more complex than he had assumed, and said that “the preventive check is peculiar to man, and arises from that distinctive superiority in his reasoning faculties.”¹² In essence, humans are not mindless breeding machines; we can consider future consequences of our actions. Now, with increased data and a better understanding of how development impacts the choices of people, it would seem that Malthusian ideas would no longer receive a serious hearing. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Population Control in the 20th Century: We're Still All Going to Die

Let us jump ahead two centuries and examine the self-proclaimed “eternal optimist”¹³ Paul Ehrlich. In 1968, he published *The Population Bomb*, in which he presents this optimistic proposition: “The battle to feed humanity is over. In the 1970s, the world will undergo famines. Hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now.”¹⁴ Like Malthus, Ehrlich proposes that humanity is going to die due to our too large population, although he admits no one knows what our ideal population is.¹⁵ Like Malthus, Ehrlich has proven to be spectacularly wrong.

The view of the future presented by Ehrlich is bleak: massive famine around the world¹⁶, thermonuclear war,¹⁷ and an India, which - between 1967 and 1980- would add 200 million people, whom it could not possibly feed.¹⁸ Well, there has been no massive famine. No thermonuclear war. India currently supports well over 1.1 billion people,¹⁹ and the population growth between 1967 and 1980 was 176 million.²⁰

How does Ehrlich plan to prevent this bleak future? He declares “family planning” to be useless.²¹ The only thing that will save us is “population control.” He quotes an article from *Science* that states that the family planning fails,

“by stressing the right of parents to have the number of children they want, [family planning] evades the basic question of population policy, which is how to give societies the number of children they need. By offering only the means of couples to control fertility, it neglects the means for societies to do so.”²²

A number of his suggestions for this solution are quite shocking. Ehrlich recommends putting chemicals in the water supply or in food to sterilize people.²³ Further, that the government should give “antidotes” to select couples,²⁴ to award responsibility prizes to young couples with few kids,²⁵ to use the United States’ power to force sterilization of Indian men with more than three children.²⁶ That teachers should quietly propagandize children²⁷ and that school children should bring IUDs to “show and tell.”²⁸ Ehrlich tells us that such measures are acceptable, as it is “coercion in a good cause.”²⁹ To oversee this all, he proposes a powerful new government agency— the “Department of Population and Environment”— which would be given “the power to take whatever steps are necessary to establish a reasonable population size in the United States and to put an end to the steady deterioration of our environment.”³⁰ This federal agency would also investigate sex determination (for eugenics purposes) and export their findings and mission overseas.³¹

Ehrlich’s solution is troubling, to state it mildly. Ehrlich’s chilling conclusion to his modest proposal entitled “What if I’m Wrong?” is a twisted perversion of Pascal’s Wager. If there were any doubts about Ehrlich’s plan, his stance on the value of human life is made clear in these statements.

If I’m right, we will save the world. If I’m wrong, people will still be better fed, better housed, and happier, thanks to our efforts.

Will anything be lost if it turns out later that we can support a much larger population than seems possible today? ... Fortunately, people can be produced in vast quantities by unskilled labor who enjoy their work.³²

So what if we just intentionally kill a few billion children? So what if we killed or prevented from being conceived the next Einstein or Mozart or even Ehrlich? So what if we deprive parents all over the world, but disproportionately in the third world, of the joy of children? This cold, callous disregard for the value of life raises the question of how people can seriously consider Ehrlich's proposition.

There are a number of other works written around the same time and with the same fear-inducing message of Ehrlich's. One with a particularly interesting solution to world population problems is *Famine -1975!* by the Paddock brothers. Ehrlich cites the book approvingly and recommends the Paddocks' triage system for countries facing famine.³³ They divide countries into those who are hopeless (and thus should be abandoned); those that might survive if the developed nations provide assistance; and a third group which will survive without outside help.³⁴ One of Ehrlich's examples of the "hopeless" category is India, while West Pakistan is considered a nation that should be given aid to enable it to survive.³⁵ No consideration is given to what might happen if two countries with such a tense relationship are given two different triage levels.

Julian Simon: Putting the Debate on Sound Footing

In 1980, Ehrlich met his match in economist Julian Simon. After Ehrlich stated that he would "take even money that England will not exist in the year 2000,"³⁶ Simon offered to bet anyone that "the cost of non-government-controlled raw materials" would "not rise in the long run."³⁷ Ehrlich took him up on the bet and in 1990 wrote a check to Simon for \$576.07.³⁸ During

the period of the bet, the world's population grew by over 800 million, the largest decade growth ever."³⁹ Still, Simon won by a landslide. And although Ehrlich's theory was proven wrong, he continues to spread his ideas.

Likewise, Julian Simon did not let the bet mark the end of his involvement in the issue of population growth and population control. In his 1996 masterpiece, *The Ultimate Resource 2*, which was an update of previous research, he sets out his justifications for stating that not only is population growth not a problem for humanity in the long run, but that it is instead a positive factor for humanity and the planet.

Writing against the widely assumed view of population and environmental economics proved to present a number of obstacles for Simon, yet his work is an example of how one may present his theory and defend it soundly against all comers. Simon notes that when he first examined the population problem, he assumed that doom and gloomers like Ehrlich were correct; it was only when he examined the data that he had second thoughts.⁴⁰ Simon's work presents a plethora of data and analysis collected over a number of years supporting the following theory:

Raw materials and energy are getting less scarce. The world's food supply is improving. Pollution in the developed countries has been decreasing. Population growth has long-term benefits, though added people are a burden in the short run. Most important, fewer people are dying young.⁴¹

In sharp contrast to Ehrlich, Simon notes that this last point should be a cause for celebration, rather than a horrid fact dooming us to certain destruction.

In a statement that seems to defy common sense and certainly disagrees with most media reports, Simon does not see scarcity of resources as a long-term problem. He even goes as far as to say that the notion of finite resources is a fallacy. How does he justify this idea? The primary

means he uses is to note the distinction between engineering and economic considerations when it comes to resources. Economically, a resource, as it becomes scarcer, would rise in price.⁴² However, the long-term trend for all resources, including energy, is downward. Resources are getting less expensive, as Simon demonstrates through hundreds of pages of data and discussion; this intuitively implies that, for all relevant intents and purposes, that they are less scarce.⁴³

Simon also notes that scarcity, on the other hand, can be determined using what he terms the technologist's or engineers method.⁴⁴ This method basically tries to calculate the expected amount of a given resource on earth and then projects how long we can use that resource at given rates of use and price data.⁴⁵ While this may be perfectly suitable for oil companies determining the extent of exploration that they should engage in, it is rather meaningless in everyday life.

Simon makes a key distinction that is often overlooked in resource discussions: the difference between a resource, for instance copper, and the services provided by that resource, for example signal transmission.⁴⁶ Because all that we really "care" about is the service, and not how it is accomplished, the finite number of copper atoms currently present in the Earth is of little practical importance.⁴⁷ Copper can be recycled; we could be more efficient in our use or extraction of copper, thus expanding our supply; or we could create substitutes. In the case of data transport, we have developed substitutes (such as fiber optic technology) which greatly reduce our reliance on copper.⁴⁸ Far from being a means to our own destruction, humans actually create resources. We are not a cancer; we are builders.

While natural resources are becoming less scarce and thus cheaper, one resource is becoming increasingly scarce: human labor. By applying the same analysis of scarcity that Simon uses with non-human resources, price, he demonstrates that labor is becoming scarcer,

global wages are rising.⁴⁹ This increase in wages holds true, in the long-run, even under the present conditions of population growth. Further, the human mind presents us with an example of a truly non-renewable resource. This is an objection that population control supporters simply refuse to acknowledge. More humans mean more mouths, but they also mean more knowledge.⁵⁰

In the short run, Simon acknowledges, more people do create some problems. It takes time for all systems to adjust to new arrivals. However, this pressure simply drives innovation, which in turn solves the previous problem and the community's overall standard of living improves. A key example that Simon cites is the relationship between population density and infrastructure. As population density increases, an increase is also seen in road density.⁵¹ As Simon notes, good infrastructure is required for economic development, this again is a positive result of growing populations.⁵²

In his examination of data and theories dealing with the impact of population growth on development, Simon notes that the evidence is overwhelmingly against the Malthusian view of population growth having a negative economic impact.⁵³ Instead, the data, not surprisingly, suggests that the relationship is far more complicated.⁵⁴ For developed countries, the data shows that after the original costs of a child, each additional child has a net positive effect on per-capita income.⁵⁵ This he attributes largely to the benefits of economies of scale.⁵⁶ For less developed countries, the same impact of additional children is seen.⁵⁷ However, the benefit, Simon suggests, comes from the incentive to work and invest more in the economy as well as spurring improvement in infrastructure.⁵⁸ The conclusion that Simon reaches is that all the evidence points to the fact that population growth will, in the long run, improve the standard of living more than declining populations or zero population growth.⁵⁹

Simon's work seems to have pretty much destroyed all the support claimed by the population control crowd. There is no reason to reduce our numbers to save resources "for our children" or to encourage zero population growth in order to help economic development. Fertility rates are declining globally, especially as development increases in a region.⁶⁰ And, perhaps most importantly, he shows that human population growth is not exponential, as Malthus and many others believe. Instead human population growth involves a complex interaction of numerous variables that defies simple mathematical modeling (as shown by many past population projection failures).⁶¹ Instead of increased coercion on the part of governments to impose policies that will not do what they intend, Simon suggests that the best way to improve economic development is to encourage the defense of liberty. As examples, Simon suggests an examination of the modern economic histories of such country pairs as North and South Korea, East and West Germany, and China and Taiwan.⁶²

The Present: Saying the Same Message and Expecting a Different Outcome

Not satisfied with the beating that they took from Simon, the population control supporters are still trying to advance the same old ideas. They have taken advantage of the present discussion of global warming to add further fuel to their cause. One of the more popular writers at the moment is Jeffrey Sachs, an economist and director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University.⁶³ His book *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet* is a popular work designed to present his view for solving the world's problems. Sachs presents his arguments in a far more reasoned way than Ehrlich did, which makes it much easier to take him seriously. His view of resources is rather interesting. While Sachs states that we may exhaust the supply of oil in a few decades, in the next paragraph he takes a stance on resources that is somewhat similar to Simon's when he admits that we could switch to other resources to obtain

the same service.⁶⁴ However, it seems that Sachs is unable come to Simon's conclusion of resources as simply a "provider" of a services and what this implies for resource limits.

This failure is compounded by Sachs' very clear statist and anti-market tendencies throughout the book. Sachs provides a perfect example of a "knowledge problem" when he says "[t]he policy challenge is to set the right balance between freely available scientific information, which has to be financed by the public-sector and... privately owned technology, which can be stimulated by the prospect of a patent."⁶⁵ But then, Sachs is in favor of global control for determining this balance,⁶⁶ which would further exacerbate the problem.

In a paragraph which sums up his discussion of resource allocation, the serious logical problems of Sachs' position are made clear.

[T]he world is facing enormous ecological and environmental problems, but running out of natural resources is not the right way to describe the threat. Earth has the energy, land, biodiversity, and water resources to feed humanity and support long-term economic prosperity for all. The problem is that markets might not lead to their wise and sustainable use. There is no economic imperative that will condemn us to deplete our vital resource base, but neither is there an invisible hand that will prevent us from doing so. The choice will be ours to make through public policy and global cooperation.⁶⁷

First, he admits that there is no shortage to raise concerns. Sachs then goes on a statist, anti-market assault citing the off chance that markets could be "wrong" according some very subjective qualifiers of "wise and sustainable" use. The greater possibility that the government could very well do the same does not seem to cross his mind.

Thankfully, when it comes to population control, Sachs does not recommend some of the more radical ideas espoused by Ehrlich and others. He still holds that there are too many people to "absorb safely" and selects a goal for world population of 8 billion by 2050.⁶⁸ He never really explains how he determined this number. Nor does he address Simon's view that a maximum

number of people is not a question that can be answered scientifically, but is rather a matter of personal opinion. Sachs also does not have an answer to Rothbard's assertion that population growth follows development. Sachs states that there is a problem with so much of the population growth occurring in the world's poorest countries.⁶⁹ However, Sachs then notes convergence as being the "dominant force at play in the world economy in our era."⁷⁰ Such problems in presenting a complete argument plague Sachs' book.

The "second great challenge of sustainable development," according to Sachs, is "controlling population."⁷¹ He states that "decentralized decision making of individual households can easily lead to excessive population growth, at rates that jeopardize the physical environment and the well-being of the children (and later generations)."⁷² Family size is too important for control to belong with the family? Who should determine it, according to Sachs? Why, the State, or probably more accurately, a "global consensus," of course! Sachs states that "public policies designed to promote a voluntary reduction of fertility rates can have an enormous effect, benefiting both present and future generations."⁷³

Let us examine his position point by point. First of all, from an economic perspective, this is a rather frightening position. Collectivist policies are being applied to reproduction, which seems to be a rather private matter. Secondly, as examined earlier, Simon, Rothbard, and many others have shown that such plans are unnecessary. Sachs even reports on data that should point to such a conclusion, but he seems to miss the implications. He states that the "most important reason" for the fall in fertility rate is a decline in child mortality.⁷⁴ Not population control! In another place, Sachs recognizes other driving forces, including the education of women and females in the labor force⁷⁵ and increased literacy,⁷⁶ as playing important roles in lowering population growth without any coercive policies.

From an ethical perspective, which is always important, because economics deals with humans, we encounter even more serious problems. One must wonder who determines the value of a child? What standards shall be used? Sachs presents no answers. Secondly, Sachs mentions that this policy will benefit future generations. Because Sachs includes abortion as part of his plan, one must wonder how it really benefits the children who are aborted “for their own good.”

Next, Sachs’ definition of “voluntary” here and throughout his book is highly suspect. No, he is not talking of Chinese-style forced abortions. And he doesn’t have in mind Ehrlich’s idea for water supply hormones, but what does he propose? Sachs has a nine-point system to his population control plan.

Some are not really objectionable from an ethical perspective: improved child survival, education of women, “empowerment” of women, the green revolution, and urbanization.⁷⁷ Other parts of his plan, however, present ethical problems. The first is “access to reproductive health services.” This includes not just making contraceptives available, but also using health workers to push for the use of contraception.⁷⁸ Secondly, he states that abortion must be legalized, which is problematic on a number of levels. As Rothbard notes, the Zero Population Growth crowd’s logic necessarily leads to the suggestion that they “should advocate the murder by government planners of large numbers of existing people;” he suggests, that the main restraint on such plans is fear of being called racists.⁷⁹ Instead, they focus on eliminating the unborn. How can it be morally justifiable to kill any group of humans for the benefit of another group? It seems to me that the only answer to this question is no. To Ehrlich, Sachs and others, though, the answer seems to be yes, even if it requires force.

Finally, Sachs lists the two related issues of old age security and “public leadership.”⁸⁰ These two methods involve government coercion to bring about desired outcomes, supposedly beneficial to society. Such a situation obviously brings up the issue of knowledge problems. The issue of the level of care for aging relatives is an immensely personal subject, and yet, Sachs seems to think it is too important to allow families to decide. By public leadership, Sachs seems to mean that governments will lead by example and by creating programs in the areas of eradicating traditional culture and replacing it with Sachs’ idea of modern culture. He specifically notes that government leadership is important in “shifting cultural norms” and he points to “religious leaders” as the reactionary bad guys trying to delay “fertility transition” and thus development.⁸¹ In his discussion on Africa, he condemns traditional religion and culture as factors keeping that continent from realizing its full potential.⁸² While they may avoid charges of racism and genocide, it seems that the supporters of population control are still willing to espouse cultural imperialism in the name of helping all of mankind.

Humans and the Environment: Carrying Capacity

The issue of population control is still present with us so many years after Malthus first attempted to explain the need for it. It seems that seldom does a week pass without news articles on the need for population reduction in some form, for some reason. The underlying assumption is that there is some fixed level above which we cannot go, for our own good. Yet, is there? Sachs has established a goal of 8 billion people as a stable level by 2050.⁸³ Ehrlich shares Sachs’ view, although he does not specify a number. His comments in *Population Bomb* suggest that he believes a number can be determined.⁸⁴ This may be the only truly optimistic statement in the entire book.

In reality, though, no such number can be determined objectively. In this area, Simon makes a very important point: empirically, we cannot say if we have too many or too few people.⁸⁵ We have no objective standard on which to base such a judgment. In raising an essential point, Rothbard and Simon explain that with more people, you actually have more solutions to any problems that may arise. Technology is not the answer; people are. Further, historical data is meaningless. The carrying capacity of stone-age America with hunter-gatherer societies is completely different than that of an agrarian society or an industrial, high technology society. Such comparisons are unfair and cannot serve as the bases for predicting the future.

The only way that we can say that we have too many people is based on personal preference. Some people seem to enjoy living in New York City or Chicago or London. Others prefer open spaces over compact cities. Which one of us should use our standards of “too crowded” to set a world population level? Such a position summarizes what Ehrlich, Sachs, and the population control crowd are saying. They would rather have fewer people on Earth. To justify and scare the rest of us into agreeing with their preferences, they cite scientific data to support their claims. If scientific data says so, it must be true! This realization is a bit troubling. The whole program is a sham. To make matters worse, those supporting the population control position are currently enjoying great success. One must wonder how many people will die as a result.

Conclusion

Population control is government coercion of the most deviant kind. The English author Hilaire Belloc once said that “the control of the production of wealth is the control of human life itself.”⁸⁶ It seems that the supporters of population control have found a more direct route.

Government force is to be applied to achieve an end that is both immoral and unnecessary. By its very nature, population control necessarily imposes limits on liberty in order to achieve its goal. This makes the whole situation even more terrible. Increases in liberty, particularly in stronger property rights, are what brings lasting development to countries. And as Rothbard notes, developing countries need fewer UN controls, “whether of population or of anything else;” instead, they would benefit far more if “international and domestic government... let them alone.”⁸⁷ These struggling nations need stronger property rights and less intervention. Consequently, prosperity will develop, and population will respond on its own. Sadly, the more that population control is applied in order to try and improve the conditions of people in third-world countries, the more likely it is that they will actually be worse off.

Population control is an immoral and ineffective solution to a problem that does not exist. Through the work of Julian Simon and others, we see that the assumptions of the population control supporters do not have empirical support. It is also abundantly clear that the theoretical basis for such claims is built on faulty assumptions. Humans are far more complex in important ways than any model has assumed, which is why we see population projections often failing conspicuously. Humans have brains and we can change both ourselves and our environment. This is what makes humanity, in Simon’s words, “the ultimate resource.” The ultimate tragedy is that, sadly, the one resource that the population control supporters wish to deplete is people, who should be our source of hope for the future

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