A critical assessment of the environmental case for, and the ethics of, external interventions to control global South population growth

Michael E. Arth - 21 August 2019

Introduction

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change established that the reduction of anthropogenic carbon emissions requires urgent global cooperation (IPCC, 2019). While the historical data show the global North, on a per-capita basis, to be the primary source of cumulative carbon emissions, virtually all future increase in population will occur in the global South. High per-capita consumption, combined with control over the vast majority of the world's wealth and income by the developed countries, led to the agreement by 196 countries in the Paris Accord that developed countries should take the lead and bear the primary burden in mitigating and preventing the effects of climate change (UNFCCC, 2016). What was not discussed in the Paris climate talks was population.

Placing the primary onus on the developed countries to decarbonize their economies and reduce emissions does not settle the contentious question of how to elicit sufficient cooperation, or whether intervention in the population growth of the least developed, high-birth rate countries is ethically warranted in pursuit of that aim. This essay critically examines the effect of overpopulation on the environment, with special focus on the tension between individual and collective rights. It is divided into three sections. 1. Defines overpopulation and examines the dynamics between humans and their environment. 2. Conceptualizes the ethics involved in population control while reviewing past abuses and interventions in relation to reproductive health policies. 3. Concludes that external intervention in the form of facilitated choices and voluntary incentives is warranted in certain countries, but that the thorny ethical, practical, and political implications—on the individual, state, and global level—would have to be carefully managed for the benefit of all stakeholders.

1. The Environment and Population

Overpopulation is defined as the point beyond which a given population exceeds the environment's carrying capacity. This definition is subject to fluid, wide-ranging, regulating factors, but the Global Footprint Network data indicate that it would take 1.7 Earths to sustain present levels of consumption, and that a European lifestyle could support only two billion people. At the same time, the planet is experiencing the sixth mass extinction, also known as the Anthropocene extinction, threatening

roughly one million, non-human plants and animals (Purvis, 2019). In addition to the loss of bio-diversity, humans also face a multitude of factors that will determine how many people the Earth can sustain. Even if we were somehow able to vastly lower consumption with various novel solutions, out of a reasonable sense of caution regarding the only life-supporting planet we know it would still be imprudent to increase our numbers. This is especially true when considering efforts to improve the lives of the numerous global poor.

Due to human activities, primarily resulting from the burning of fossil fuels, the Earth is now hotter than at any time in recorded history. Carbon dioxide levels have not been this high in three million years. The average temperature of the planet has increased to 1.0°C above pre-industrial levels, and is likely to reach 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052 at the current pace (IPCC, 2019). Climate change is already contributing to costly, extreme weather events. The sea is rising at an increasing rate—now over three millimeters per year—due to both thermal expansion caused by the warming ocean and by the melting of land-based ice. The IPPC report, written by 63 scientists, warns that additional climate-related risks to health, livelihoods, food security, and economic growth will increase as the temperature rises, with the greatest negative impact occurring in poor countries. Scientists caution that even the ambitious goals submitted under the Paris Accords will not be enough to prevent global warming to 1.5°C, and they recommend further decarbonization to reduce emissions.

A snapshot of the last 24 hours demonstrates the urgency: Since yesterday, humans added 207 billion pounds of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere (Global Carbon Project, 2018). At the same time, 160,000 acres (64,750 hectares) of tropical rain forest were lost or seriously degraded for food production, thus reducing carbon sequestration (FAO, 2018). Perhaps most significantly, in a world already containing 7.7 billion people, 387,000 were born, and 160,000 died, for a daily net gain of 227,000. Today, 55% of the population lives in cities, with the percentage to rise to 68% by 2050 (UN World Urbanization Prospects, 2018). In a single day, 430,000 people, a number almost equal to the population of Miami, migrated from rural areas to the cities. As a result, internal migration puts stress on social services and concentrates poverty into slums as people become less connected to the land and more dependent on specialized job skills in crowded urban niches (World Migration Report, 2015). Approximately 165 million of the 285 million international migrants had moved to cities in high-income countries by 2017, thus drastically increasing their carbon footprint. There are 50 million immigrants in the US alone, an increase of more than 40% between 2000 and 2017 (UN International Migration Report, 2017). Even though migrants comprise a small fraction of the global population, international migration has dramatically increased the percentage of immigrants in many high-income countries, and appears to be exacerbating nativism and xenophobia (Miller & Rensmann, 2010).

Migration has clearly played a role in the ascendancy of authoritarian demagogues and nationalist movements in various countries.

According to the 2019 United Nations World Population Prospects, "Since 2010, 27 countries or areas have experienced reduction of one percent or more in the size of their populations. This drop is caused by sustained low levels of fertility…[and] reinforced in some locations by high rates of emigration." Low fertility is potentially good news for the environment, especially since most of this drop is occurring in high-consuming countries. What is alarming is that the U.N. medium-variant projection of human population in 2100 is nearly 11 billion, with almost all the growth occurring in the very poor countries of sub-Saharan Africa. (The high-variant is 12.7 billion.) Africa's population is expected to soar from 1.3 billion at the beginning of 2019 to 4.3 billion in 2100, with most of the remaining increase in Asia. Of the 21 high fertility countries, 19 are in Africa and two are in South Asia (Afghanistan and East Timor). The medium-variant projection *already assumes* "substantial reductions in fertility" from contraceptive use, which in Africa's less developed countries (LDCs) is currently below 25%. Furthermore, none of the UN's projections make any mention of the possibility of radical life extension through medical science. Even without this calculation, 33 countries will at least triple in population, and six will quintuple in this century. "The concentration of population growth in the poorest countries will make it harder for those governments to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality, combat hunger and malnutrition, expand and update education and health systems, improve the provision of basic services and ensure that no-one is left behind." (World Population Prospects, 2017:5)

The potential support ratio (PSR) refers to the number of potential workers per retiree. The United Nations Population Fund states that if adolescent girls have opportunities including school, life-long learning employment, family planning, laws on violence and discrimination, delayed marriage, security, work/life balance, wealth/child investment and a secure old age, Africa might produce a demographic dividend (UNFPA, 2016). On the other hand, the UN's Population Division estimates that in Africa in 2020 there will be sixteen people aged 15-64 for every person 65 or older (PSR = 16.0). In Uganda, an extreme case, the PSR is 26.2. By contrast, Europe's PSR is 3.4, the U.S. is 3.9, and Japan is 1.8. With increasing automation and the diminishing need for low-skill factory workers, these numbers suggest that the PSR could be extremely low—perhaps below one. This indicates an aging population is highly beneficial as dwindling numbers allow for reduced consumption, labor-saving innovation, and an improving environment. According to research, the single greatest contribution to climate change one can make is to have one fewer child, even before estimating the soaring rate of cumulative emissions from descendants (Wynes & Nicholas, 2017).

In 1992, a warning letter signed by more than 17,000 of the world's most prominent scientists, and a majority of the living Nobel laureates, called for government leaders to stop environmental degradation. This included a call to stabilize populations through improved social and economic planning, as well as voluntary family planning. "Pressures resulting from unrestrained population growth put demands on the natural world that can overwhelm any efforts to achieve a sustainable future. If we are to halt the destruction of our environment, we must accept limits to that growth." (Ripple et al, 2017). In the 2017 Second Warning, 15,364 scientists from 184 countries declared their earlier warning was not heeded on a range of environmental issues. The worsening trends included declining freshwater availability, unsustainable marine fisheries, ocean dead zones, forest loss, dwindling biodiversity, climate change, and high fertility levels. As a result of inattention, the world's population has increased by 35% in those 25 years, and continued rapid population growth remains the "primary driver behind many ecological and even societal threats." (Crist et al, 2017:260-264)

2. Ethical perspectives on Population Control

Issues raised by T.R. Malthus, J.S. Mill, Marx and others still inform the ethical debate over population. When Malthus first wrote his famous essay on overpopulation in 1798, there were one billion people. More than two centuries and nearly seven billion people later, Malthus is remembered for his formula: "Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio." (Malthus, 1798:ch.1). Malthus could not foresee how elastic the limits of subsistence were and how far they could be stretched with technology, agriculture, and geography, but modern, environmental Neo-Malthusians see new limits and advocate population control programs to safeguard resources for current and future populations. Malthus was an Anglican cleric who believed God imposed excess population growth on humans to teach them restraint and virtuous behavior ("preventative checks"). When they failed to measure up they were punished with starvation, disease, war, and premature death. Such "positive checks" (now more appropriately called "Malthusian catastrophes") would restore the population to more sustainable levels. Very few modern people would suggest that "an oscillation between happiness and misery," as Malthus put it, is a viable solution.

J.S. Mill believed the world could support large numbers of people but "saw very little reason for desiring it." (Mill 1848). According to his "harm principle," sex would be a "self-regarding act," but procreation could be an "other-regarding act" (Mill, 1859). Mill's harm principle may have been inspired by British economist William Forster Lloyd whose parable in his 1833 pamphlet laid the basis for Garret Hardin's frequently cited 1968 article, *The Tragedy of the Commons*. Hardin wrote

that selfish "free riders" were being unjustly favored in Article 16 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states "decisions about family size must irrevocably rest with the family and cannot be made by anyone else."

For Karl Marx, capitalism causes overpopulation by exploitively degrading the environment and human life. It does this by producing more working age people who can provide cheap, well-disciplined, replaceable, surplus labor (Marx, 1867). But even under communism, population control was justified. In reaction to Malthus, Engels argued that a communist society could "regulate the production of men, just as it will have already regulated the production of things" (Engels, 1881).

Critics of population control have frequently pointed to numerous historical examples of coercive policies, including genocide, ethnic cleansing, forced or selective sterilization, infanticide, or eugenics. Nazi Germany's racial policies and eugenics involving the S.S.'s pro-natalist *Lebensborn* program (designed to raise the birth rate of "Aryans"), forced sterilization of "abnormal" people, and the extermination of Jews are among history's most chilling examples (Longerich, 2010). Nazis were reportedly inspired by American eugenicists who forcibly sterilized some 30,000 people in 29 states between 1907 and 1939 (Kuhl, 2002). China's one and two-child birth policies were less coercive only by comparison.

Today, Diana Coole divides the ethical arguments over population control into *ends*, which are about the consequences resulting from overpopulation, and those which are concerned with the *means*. "Hostility to population control may stem from a belief that government meddling with private reproductive behavior in pursuit of demographic ends is inherently coercive and thus illegitimate, irrespective of the merits of the ends pursued." (Coole, 2018:5-6). Utilitarian consequentialists generally favor population control to achieve positive goals. According to 2013 UN survey, a majority of countries already practice some form of pro-natalist or anti-natalist population control, mostly without much controversy. Forms of this control fall into three categories. *Choice-providing measures* offer contraception, education and opportunities and security for women. *Incentive-changing policies* include educational and social campaigns, financial incentives, tax credits, child allowances, or fines. Applicability is determined by whether the policies are pro or anti-natalist. The most *coercive policies* would involve tragic choices, such as forcibly preventing new babies through infanticide, sterilization, and forced abortion. (Cripps, 2018:4-5). On the pro-natalist side, coercion could involve forcing a woman to bear an unwanted child, even in the case of rape. At present, coerced birth control is far less prevalent than coerced childbearing. (Coole, 2018:82). We shall assume that only choice and incentives are ethical under the present circumstances, even though some see the ends as not justifying the means with even the gentlest of choice and incentive related

policies. Nonetheless, critical voices are muted in regards pro-natalist population control like parental leave, childcare, flexible work schedules, welfare, and child tax credits.

Donna Haraway believes that humans are a threat to the environment (including other species) and that lower human population levels are desirable. She favors a soft approach calling for more women to voluntarily give up having children by "making kin" outside the traditional family structure with lateral networks of friends (Haraway, 2015) Others take the post-colonial, constructivist approach that anti-natalist population and migration control is politically constructed by elites for their own special interests. Betsy Hartmann, for example, sees overpopulation as a "over-exaggerated" myth used to attack women's rights, and considers the terms "climate refugees" and "climate conflict" to be alarmist rhetoric designed to militarize humanitarian and developmental assistance. (Hartmann, 1995 & 2010)

Interventionist, anti-natalist family planning in the LDCs has also been resisted by many for reasons related to colonialism, prior abuse, race, and gender. These issues influenced the "development must precede family planning" agenda beginning with the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, UN 1994:73). Business interests also tend to be pro-natalist because it is the nature of capitalism to seek ever-expanding growth. Technological optimists like Julian Simon and Bjørn Lomborg have expressed confidence that innovation will permit the population and the economy to grow indefinitely. Certain religious groups promote increasing their numbers for political advantage, or following what they believe to be a divine command to be fruitful and multiply. Policymakers living in countries where fertility is in decline often ignore population growth elsewhere while promoting pro-natalist population control at home.

Critical theorists excoriate governments, corporations, and NGOs for forcing dangerous contraceptives or sterilization on women in LDCs. In the case of Tanzania (formerly German East Africa) racialized, gendered discourses are seen to serve the interests of capital, both with pro-natalist policies during the colonial period designed to increase labor, and with anti-natalist efforts to eliminate superfluous labor (Bendix, 2016). African women are seen as having been assaulted under colonialism, slavery and apartheid, with their wombs viewed as "resources territory for exploitation and control in the development of the contemporary global economic system" (Kuumba, 2001:22). Kalpana Wilson criticizes USAID, UNFPA, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for announcing, on World Population Day 2012, an eight-year, $2.6 billion family planning strategy to get 120 million women in high fertility countries to use voluntary family planning (Wilson, 2017). She argues the resurgent interest in population control is being reframed to cloak a hidden process of "accumulation by dispossession to which the intensification of women's labor, and its mobilization for

global capital, is central." Women in her view are increasingly incorporated into global value chains dominated by transnational corporations. Wilson documents population-related abuses in India dating back in the mid-19th century where a famine in India was exacerbated by Viceroy Lord Lyton who invoked Malthusian principles (Wilson, 2017:52). She also lists instances of modern era land-grabbing, dispossession, and displacement in India that was accompanied by "genocidal gendered violence against women by Hindu supremacists" led by prime minister Narendra Modi.

On the consequentialist side of the debate, the problem of overpopulation can be seen to be so intertwined with the welfare of the planet, that rich countries would be negligent if they did not initiate incentive-changing population policies. Climate justice advocate Elizabeth Cripps argues that we have to make hard choices now about the effect of overpopulation on the environment in order to protect the commons, uphold inter-generational justice, and avoid the possibility of tragic choices later involving violations of basic human rights and irreversible damage to the environment (Cripps, 2015). Sarah Conley in *One Child: Do We Have the Right to More?* makes a similar point about the environment, while arguing that procreation is not an unlimited right and that voluntary compliance cannot be counted upon (Conley 2016).

3. Conclusion

"From a demographic perspective, it seems pragmatic to concentrate on helping regions where population growth is most evident, especially if this impedes their aspirations to eliminate poverty….Yet focusing on fertility reduction here provokes accusations of racism and eugenics, a charge exemplified by Hardt and Negri's assertion that it is 'difficult to separate most contemporary projects of population control from a kind of racial panic.' The intersection of causality, blames and interests marks one of the most politically combustible arenas in population disputes." (Coole, 2018: 10-11).

Indeed, there are many well-meaning yet dissenting views regarding population. But most agree that no population exists in isolation, and that while racial panic is abhorrent, environmental panic is justified. We humans are constantly on the move, exchange is the lifeblood of our economy, and we all breathe (and pollute) the same air. This makes all of us stakeholders in the global, collective enterprise. Perhaps, as in medicine, the first principle should be to do no harm. The second principle should then be to do some good, which means acting swiftly in the interests of our common humanity. This would require coming to terms with the stark evidence scientists and researchers have set before us. A quarter-century and two billion additional people later, the clock has run out on the development-before-family-planning approach based on discredited, conventional modernization theory. Instead, LDCs have fallen into a low-equilibrium "Malthusian trap." Procreation is now

widely recognized as an other-regarding act. Incentivized family planning does involve some hard choices, but they are pragmatic and not tragic. Coole suggests it would involve a "matrix of messages, rewards and sanctions" synchronizing "private choices and public interests with minimum friction." (Coole, 2018:25, 99). We will all be better off if the rich offer incentives to the poor, to facilitate decisions that will be in everyone's interest, and to help end poverty. This would mean combining family planning with sustainable development. On the way to doing what is best for all concerned, based on pragmatic, ethical, democratic, and humanitarian principles, we might also be wary of seeking the perfect to the detriment of the good. Because while we argue, the clock is ticking on a population that grows by three people every second.

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For a practical solution to both environmental issues and overpopulation see my Eco-Initiative.

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