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HUMAN OVERPOPULATION: THE ELEPHANT IN THE GREENHOUSE

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Unlike plagues of the dark ages or contemporary diseases we do not yet understand, the modern plague of overpopulation is soluble by means we have discovered and with resources we possess. What is lacking is not sufficient knowledge of the solution but universal consciousness of the gravity of the problem and education of the billions who are its victims.¹

Martin Luther King, Jr.

When it comes to the environmental crisis, human overpopulation remains a topic discreetly avoided in public debate. But, as Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., Jane Goodall, and Sir David Attenborough have stated, unchecked human population growth and its planetary consequences will have increasingly dire repercussions. Why, then, has the subject of human population not been more urgently discussed? Why have many of those involved in climate-change discussions—including the World Climate Summit conventions—neglected the topic of human overpopulation?



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Human overpopulation has been repeatedly dismissed as a fundamental cause of climate change in favour of other issues, particularly overconsumption in the Global North, leading to land, water, and air pollution, biodiversity loss, and accelerated extinctions of other species. Population growth has been ignored in favour of blaming the pursuit of prosperity: the acquisition of wealth and goods, the myth of unending resources, the shibboleths of “development” and “progress,” technology-driven accumulation, and the capitalist orthodoxy of relentless economic “improvement.” Rampant

individualism and the increased privatisation of local or national “commons” continue to catalyse overconsumption, which is, of course, also a major driver of climate change.

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No longer solely confined to the Northern Hemisphere, overconsumption also affects the Global South, which increasingly aspires to, and where possible, participates in, capitalist consumption. Modi’s India, South and Central America, and an expansionist China, as well as regions of the African continent, pursue consumerist aspirations, inducted into what David Brooks terms “saturation capitalism.”²

But consumption depends on consumers. The world population has increased from 2.5 billion in 1950 to a staggering 8 billion in November 2022. As David Attenborough has stated, “all environmental problems become easier to solve with fewer people, and harder and ultimately impossible to solve with ever more people.”³ Radical differences exist between population numbers and growth rates in rich and poor nations. Nevertheless, the latest United Nations report estimates that by 2050 the world population will reach 9.7 billion.⁴ And as *Population Matters* notes: “In the UK, each one of us is responsible for nearly 8.34 tonnes of CO₂ per year . . . : a growing population counteracts the benefits of other crucial climate actions, and choosing smaller families is vital if we are to ensure that the changes we make are effective and lasting.”⁵

Of course, not all people have reproductive choice. In the Global North, those who do have the luxury to choose should be insisting on a frank and open discussion of the connections between reproductive and global health, and move, individually and communally, towards setting the example of having one child, or at most, two children.

In part, apparent statistical anomalies have stymied the discussion of overpopulation, with declines in birth rates often interpreted as declines in absolute population. Furthermore, on average, birth rates in the Global North have declined faster than in the Global South, and activists have largely avoided stepping onto the thin ice of a discussion of global population reduction. But while fertility rates and births have fallen in some Western countries, absolute population continues to grow, albeit at a slower pace than in other parts of the globe. The reluctance to discuss population, or for individuals to choose to limit their numbers of descendants, continues to inhibit viable solutions.

Seeking to reduce future population numbers does not diminish the sanctity of human lives and rights as set out in the United Nations Charter.

The perception that curbing the human population threatens human rights stems from a misunderstanding of what reducing a future population might involve. Controlling birth rates raises the spectres of eugenics and genocide, anathema to the ideals of human rights. Population stability or reduction may also seem to devalue, or even threaten, the lives of those already here. However, does asking people to consider reducing the number of children they produce violate their human rights? Seeking to reduce future population numbers does not diminish the sanctity of human lives and rights as set out in the United Nations Charter. If an individual is not subject to state- or group-controlled imposition or compulsion, their personal decision to have one or, at most, two children should be seen as a sensible, environmental choice, not a violation of human rights.

Furthermore, taking account of human rights should not sideline the rights of other living beings on our planet. Human existence and well-being are interwoven with other organisms and ecosystems of the world. Our anthropocentric attitudes not only drastically harm nonhumans but ultimately damage humans through the degradation and disappearance of nonhuman ecologies.

One widely held theory asserts that the education of women will necessarily lead to a decline in population, but in many parts of the Global South, women's education and liberation from patriarchal regimes and cultures remain long-term aspirations. Even in the Global North, apparently unrelated cultural, religious, political, and economic agendas threaten women's reproductive rights as demonstrated in the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the US Supreme Court in 2022. In sum, the impact of overpopulation, and its influence on women's lives, needs to be addressed on a global scale.



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Discussions of human overpopulation have a long and controversial history. Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, published in 1798, generally regarded as the first modern text to address the issue, has been interpreted, misinterpreted, and sometimes employed in contradictory ways. Certainly, the mention of Malthus's name immediately conjures associations with human population numbers, whether positive or negative. As Robert J. Mayhew in his introduction to Malthus's *Essay* (2015) points out, the economist's "historical power and importance rests precisely in the fact that people don't have to read him to invoke his name" and his reputation as a "prophet, variously false or visionary."⁶

The mention of Malthus's name immediately conjures associations with human population numbers, whether positive or negative.

Responding to William Godwin's claim that as civilisation advanced, sexual desire would wither, Malthus argued that desire would not decline and that human beings needed food to survive. Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio while food production increases only in an arithmetical ratio. The difficulty arises in balancing population and food resources. In his own time, Christians, and later many Romantic poets subjected Malthus's *Essay* to intense criticism, arguing against what they saw as a ("Malthusian") materialism where food, clothing, and housing appeared the only necessities for "the perfectibility of mankind." Yet nineteenth-century materialists like Marx and Engels, though indebted to Malthus's ideas, particularly the boom and bust cycles inherent in capitalist ideology, rejected his tendency to regard these as "natural." Instead, they argued that "the harmonious society" that would come with the arrival of communism in Europe "would be able to regulate the production of human beings."⁷

However, the Christian and Communist hostility to Malthus did not end with Marx and Engels, but became embedded in state socialisms as well as capitalist ideologies.⁸ For example, in the case of China, Mao in 1949 dismissed the idea that food cannot keep up with increases in population as the "absurd argument of a bourgeois Westerner."⁹ The subsequent Chinese famine of the 1950s, during which millions starved to death, radically changed this position, leading eventually to China's one-child policy. More recently, Mao's original idea of uninhibited population growth seems to have resurfaced, perhaps (ironically), through China's state and private global capitalist expansionism,

guaranteeing the country access to world food supplies and other (supposedly) essential commodities in the future.

Despite many nineteenth-century detractors, Malthus also had supporters amongst many economists. And as Alfred Russel Wallace writes, he and Charles Darwin, in “formulating one of the most important nineteenth-century revolutions in human thought, had been inspired by beetle-collecting, travel, and a shared encounter with Malthus.” The latter was “the spark that lit the fire,” and Darwin directly references Malthus in *On the Origin of Species* (1859).¹⁰



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More recent detractors of Malthus have concentrated on the argument that Malthus's prognoses have still not really come to pass. Human reasoning and technological skill have averted food crises and the consequences Malthus predicted. But as the British philosopher John Gray suggests, “Malthus explains the future of global warfare in the twenty-first century far more effectively than the discussions of the clash of political or religious ideals, while Niall Ferguson has told us in the context of both rising food prices and increased price volatility not to count Malthus out too soon.” Even more “sober economists” such as Nobel laureates Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz have acknowledged that “whereas they could dismiss Malthusian fears about the balance between population and resources over the previous three decades, present statistical data leaves them much less confident.”¹¹

When Paul and Anne Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb* in 1968, they also experienced some of the unfounded prejudices levelled against Malthus's writing and energised new concerns, again sparking both global support and outrage. Along with warning against the potential effects of an exponential increase in global population, their suggestions for ameliorating the coming crisis seemed to many both draconian and racist. While issues of class had dogged the reception of Malthus's essay, some of the Ehrlichs' proposals, such as cutting aid to countries of the Global

South—already facing the challenge of balancing food supply with rapidly increasing populations—were regarded as unfair. The Ehrlichs thus joined Malthus as both prophets and “fascists.” The unfortunate hijacking of their text to advance racist, eugenicist, and other toxic agendas further stifled discussion of the role of population growth in the attempt to address climate change, species extinction, and planetary impoverishment.

Some governments have tried to stem population growth, but failed—India, for instance, and China in particular. The deleterious consequences of the one-child policy instituted as a response to the great famine, failed for a very different reason—the cultural preference for male over female children. The resulting infanticide and a disturbing gender imbalance led to the abandonment of the policy after a small, short-term decline in population.



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Having failed to curb its population growth, China’s current imperial expansionism, including massive acquisition of the world’s land and food resources, serves as a rearguard action in response to this domestic failure, designed to shore up a future for China in a world of human overpopulation, where the scarcity of land, food, and general resource commodities lead to international scarcity and ultimately war. The failures of the one-child policy support arguments against governmentally imposed population control, and as *Population Matters* highlights, future top-down attempts of this nature are not likely to be viable anyway.¹²

In Japan, where the birth rate (but not the overall population) is indeed declining, maintaining a capitalist economy remains the main concern, an always rising population regarded as necessary to the overweening economic interest. Because of the low level of migration to Japan, the feared population deficit raises the spectre of GDP downgrade. Japan’s apparent population decline is often (erroneously) cited as a disturbing harbinger for capitalist economies worldwide.

In some European states, political regimes have begun to employ nationalist and racist strategies. Fears of depopulation have led to the “remedy” of encouraging large families, specifically linked with anti-migration policies by right-wing populist governments. In Hungary, for example, Victor Orbán has promised a lifetime tax exemption for families with four or more children; however, his much vaunted “family-friendly” Hungary extends from his government’s anti-migration policies. In his 2019 State of the Nation address, Orbán said of the more migrant-friendly European nations: “They want as many migrants to enter as there are missing kids, so that the numbers will add up. We Hungarians have a different way of thinking. Instead of just numbers, we want Hungarian children. Migration for us is surrender.”¹³

Overpopulation cannot be addressed through nationalist or racist agendas but must be tackled on a global scale.

In both Russia and Poland, state-sponsorship measures have also been instituted to encourage large (non-migrant) families. As Putin puts it, “Russia’s fate and its historic prospects depend on how many of us there are . . . It depends on how many children are born in Russian families.” Italy and Greece have also introduced baby bonuses, and Australia, under Tony Abbott’s mercifully short leadership, did likewise. In 2017, the UN estimated that by 2100, the population of West Africa will grow from 372 million to 1.6 billion.¹⁴ This generally unwarranted spectre of national depopulation

now drives prejudice against African and Asian migrants, displaced by wars and climate change, arguably themselves products of world overpopulation.

Overpopulation, a global problem, cannot be addressed through nationalist or racist agendas, but must be tackled on a global scale as the displacement and movements of peoples, whether through war, climate crises, hunger, or lifestyle aspirations, have begun to render overpopulation a potentially lethal force. The victims of overpopulation not only include *Homo sapiens* but also the myriad of other beings on which our ultimate survival depends.

While measures such as education and the availability of contraception will ameliorate overpopulation, a long-term solution will only happen if the public addresses the fundamental human cause of the global environmental crises. Government education campaigns focussing on the threats overpopulation poses might offer a way forward, as long as they stay absolutely clear of nationalist arguments and racist sentiment, as in the rhetoric of Putin and Orbán. Open discussion must first take place, an acknowledgment of our fatal anthropocentrism and a radical reorientation towards life on a shared planet. As Jane Goodall says, “We can’t go on like this—we can’t push human population growth under the carpet.”¹⁵

Notes

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Family Planning—A Special and Urgent Concern,” speech for the Planned Parenthood Federation Award, 5 May 1966, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/planned-parenthood-gulf-coast/mlk-acceptance-speech>.

² David Brooks, *Animal Dreams* (Sydney University Press, 2021), 53.

³ *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet*, directed by Jonnie Hughes (Bristol and Gland: Silverback Films and World Wildlife Fund [WWF], 2020).

⁴ “World Population to Reach 8 Billion This Year, as Growth Rate Slows,” *UN News*, 11 July 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/07/1122272>.

⁵ “Big Baby Calls for Small Families to Cut CO₂,” *Population Matters*, Spring 2020, 9, <https://populationmatters.org/resources/population-matters-magazine-spring-2020/>.

⁶ Robert J. Mayhew, introduction to *An Essay on the Principle of Population and Other Writings*, by Thomas Malthus, ix–xxviii (London: Penguin Classics, 2015), vii. I am heavily indebted to Mayhew’s introduction for present and historical receptions of Malthus’s Essay.

⁷ Mayhew, introduction, xxix, xiii, xxx.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xxix.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xxix, xxx.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹² Robin Maynard, “From the Director: Tackling the Trickiest Subjects,” *Population Matters*, Spring 2020, 3, <https://populationmatters.org/resources/population-matters-magazine-spring-2020/>.

¹³ Shaun Walker, “Baby Machines: Eastern Europe’s Answer to Depopulation,” *The Guardian*, 4 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/04/baby-bonuses-fit-the-nationalist-agenda-but-do-they-work>.

¹⁴ Walker, “Baby Machines.”

¹⁵ Jane Goodall, *Population Matters*, Spring 2020, 11, <https://populationmatters.org/resources/population-matters-magazine-spring-2020/>.



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