

WHO'S AFRAID OF BILLIONS OF PEOPLE?

Attempts to cajole, coerce and convince people to have fewer kids are wrong.



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NO LIMITS SHOULD BE SET ON POPULATION GROWTH. I HOPE in my lifetime the human population on Earth will reach the tens of billions, and it won't be a problem if it rises to hundreds of billions. I say this because our attitudes to the population level reflect our attitudes to human ingenuity. The population debate is dressed up in demographic and scientific clothing, but it's a political issue, reflecting political attitudes. Where you stand on population tells us a lot about where you stand on the idea of

progress, of civilization and of humanity.

It's worth asking what drives the population control and population reduction lobby. These people have been around for a few centuries and their arguments have changed over time. For one of the first population scaremongers, Thomas Malthus in the 18th century, the main problem was that if too many people were born, there wouldn't be enough food. He vastly underestimated the ability of industrialized society to create more food. In the early 20th century, population reduction arguments took on a racial and eugenic streak. Some claimed there were too many Africans and Asians, who might weaken the power of white European nations. More recently, the population control lobby has adopted the environmentalist's arguments: Too many people are demanding too much of Mother Earth.

The fact that the presentational arguments of the population reduction lobby can change so fundamentally over time, while the core belief in "too many people" remains the same, shows this is a political outlook in search of a justification. It's an existing prejudice, held by certain kinds of people, that looks around for the latest trendy or respectable ideas in which to clothe itself.

The argument frequently made by Malthusians is that there's a fixed, finite amount of resources on this ball of gas and water

we call Earth, and that if the human population reaches a certain number, those resources will be all used up. This is a deeply disingenuous depiction of what a resource is. There is little fixed about resources. The question of what is and isn't a resource changes over time, depending on the level of development reached by any particular society. For example, for the vast majority of human history, uranium wasn't a serious resource. Ancient human communities, going back 2,000 years, used uranium to make glass look more yellow. Today, uranium can be used to create vast amounts of light and energy and to power whole cities. Resources aren't fixed; their discovery and usage depends on the nature of society itself.

It's not true that the Earth is overpopulated, as you'll hear Malthusians argue. Humans inhabit only tiny parts of this planet. Take Britain as an example. Lots of people describe Britain as overcrowded. In fact, only about seven to eight percent of Britain is "settled." (By comparison, 46 percent of British land is used for agriculture and 11 or 12 percent of it is woodland.) Britain has plenty of space for more people. This planet isn't remotely overcrowded.

Then there's the idea that human numbers cause poverty. Not only is this wrong, it's also one of the most poisonous arguments of the Malthusian lobby. People in

some of the world's most populous places in the world—for example, California—are wealthy, healthy and happy, while those in some of the most sparsely populated places—to take a European example, Ireland—remain relatively poor and largely dependent on handouts. A crowded place like Manhattan can thrive, while the relatively small numbers of people in parts of Sudan experience poverty. Those who discuss poverty as being caused by overpopulation are really—quite disgracefully—letting society off the hook and distracting attention from governments that are incapable of coming up with solutions to developmental problems. They're blaming people's breeding habits for bringing on destitution.

So what really drives the population control outlook? I'd say that what's finite isn't resources, but the Malthusians' faith in humanity. It's that which is running out and drying up. For them, a human being is never anything more than "another mouth to feed." Yet humans aren't simply the burping, biological users of resources; they're the discoverers of resources, the creators of resources, the makers of communities, cities, history. A human being isn't only a mouth that must be filled but a brain that can think and a pair of hands that can work.

Anyone who thinks people are a good thing rather than a menace, and believes we can find solutions to our problems, should reject the population control argument and make the case for full freedom of choice on reproductive matters.

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