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People and the Planet

WHY POPULATION GROWTH IS SO HARD TO TALK ABOUT
AND WHY WE SHOULD TALK ABOUT IT ANYWAY

By Laurie Mazur

POPULATION IS AN ISSUE THAT inspires passionate and polarized debate. On one side are those who believe that unchecked population growth is the greatest problem facing humanity; on the other, a surprisingly diverse group (which has included Marxists, conservative economists, feminists and the religious right) argues that population growth is a complete non-issue.

The truth lies somewhere in the middle, but the public debate on population inevitably veers toward the extremes. Newcomers to the debate are often mystified by its vehemence: combatants hurl accusations of racism, misogyny, baby-killing, cultural imperialism—even genocide. So why, exactly, is it so difficult to have a civil conversation about population growth?

The first answer will be familiar to *Conscience* readers. Like abortion, population growth is inextricably linked to the most value-laden aspects of human existence: sexuality, gender and procreation. Our values and beliefs in these areas are deeply held, inscribed by culture and religion. Debates about these issues are not mere cerebral exercises; we engage them heart and soul, and the outcome seems to determine who we are as human beings.

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The second answer is more complex. To fully understand the passion generated by this issue, it is crucial to understand the history of ideas about population growth, and the real-world consequences of those ideas—beginning with one man who casts a very long shadow over the debate.

MALTHUS AND THE PARTY CRASHERS

The modern discourse on population began with Thomas Robert Malthus, the British cleric who penned “An Essay on the Principle of Population” in 1798. Malthus’ central argument was that “The power of population is...superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man.” Agriculture, he argued, could only increase production at a plodding arithmetic pace, while human numbers grow geometrically. As a result, population will inevitably outrun food production, until famine, war or other disaster brings those numbers into balance.

But it was Malthus’ stance on poverty and the poor that has made him such a polarizing figure—then and now. Malthus thought poverty grew from human numbers, rather than from inequality and exploitation. While he acknowledged and decried the unequal distribution of wealth, he thought it less important than the “superior” power of population growth. In this way, he placed the onus for poverty squarely on the shoulders of the “overbreeding” poor. And he could be staggeringly unsympathetic to the plight of the impoverished; consider this infamous passage



from the 1803 version of his *Essay*, which was excised from later editions:

A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he had a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claims of right to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him.... If [the] guests get up and make room for him, other intruders immediately appear demanding the same favour.... The order and harmony of the feast is disturbed, the plenty that before reigned is changed into scarcity; and the happiness of the guests is destroyed by the spectacle of misery and dependence in every part of the hall....

In this view, the poor are unruly party crashers, spoiling the fun for the better-off. His solution was not to set a few more places at the table, or even throw a few bread crusts to the unwanted guests. No, instead of questioning a political system that produced a few affluent landholders and a throng of desperate peasants, Malthus advocated repeal of England's Poor Laws, a system that provided meager assistance to the indigent, which he thought merely encouraged the poor to procreate.

Not surprisingly, advocates for social justice—notably Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels—vigorously denounced Malthus, calling the *Essay* “the crudest, most barbarous theory that ever existed,” and Malthus a “professional sycophant of the landed aristocracy.” These critics (as well as economists from the political right) held that better policies would enable productivity to keep pace with population growth. Marx and his followers also believed that capitalist production depleted the Earth, much as it exploited workers.

FROM EUGENICS TO ENVIRONMENTALISM

And so, the battle lines were drawn. With some variation, these positions have held for 200 years: Malthus' intellectual

progeny still blame human numbers for poverty, resource depletion and a host of social problems; many of Marx's inheritors think population issues are, at best, a distraction from dealing with core issues of inequality and, at worst, a plot against the poor. In this binary discourse, one can care about social justice, or about population—not both.

In the early 20th century, the eugenics movement took Malthusian thinking a



Thomas Malthus

step farther. While Malthus blamed the poor for their lack of “moral restraint” in childbearing, eugenicists argued that the poor's moral deficiencies were innate. They classified several groups of people as “degenerate” or “unfit”—the poor, homosexuals, the mentally and physically disabled. Whole racial and ethnic groups were deemed inferior—Jews, the Roma and African-Americans. Eugenicists sought to manage human evolution by encouraging “more [children] from the fit, less from the unfit,” first through sterilization of these “undesirable” populations, and later, under the Nazis, through mass murder. In the early decades of this century, there was considerable overlap among proponents of population control, eugenics and family planning. Birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger endorsed all three—an association that haunts the

organization she founded, Planned Parenthood, to this day.

Revulsion over the Nazi genocide discredited eugenics (though implicitly eugenic policies live on), but Malthusian thinking has proved hardier. In the 1960s, echoes of Malthus could be heard in Paul Ehrlich's “The Population Bomb.” Ehrlich famously declared that, because of population growth, “the battle to feed all humanity is over.” He warned that hundreds of millions of people would starve to death in the 1970s, and recommended “triage” in foreign aid programs. (India, considered a lost cause, didn't make the cut.)

Ehrlich wrote as Americans were becoming aware of environmental problems such as pesticide contamination and air and water pollution. It was also a time of unprecedented demographic change: world population growth peaked at 2.1 percent per year between 1965 and 1970—a rate never seen before or since. The nascent environmental movement identified population growth as the root cause of environmental problems; as Ehrlich often said, “Whatever your cause, it's a lost cause without population control.”

And many environmentalists wholeheartedly embraced the Malthusian worldview. In an influential 1974 article, the environmentalist Garrett Hardin envisioned the world's nations as a fleet of lifeboats in a churning sea. The wealthy nations' ships were amply provisioned; the poor nations' teeming boats were quickly swamped. If the wealthy plucked refugees from the sea, he argued, they too would go under. Like Malthus before him, Hardin thought poverty was a function of human numbers, and the poor's only hope was to become less numerous. To hasten that end, wealthy nations were advised to resist their charitable impulses and let nature take its awful course. Hardin argued against aid to victims of the Ethiopian famine, which he believed would only encourage disastrous population growth. And citing limits to our nation's “carrying capacity,” he opposed immigration—a view that is echoed by some environmentalists today.

“THE POPULATION BOMB” AND ITS FALLOUT

The US government did not heed Hardin’s cold-hearted injunctions to let the poor starve. But it did embrace the cause of population control, for reasons that were not entirely altruistic. A bipartisan chorus of elites, including business leaders and the national security establishment, feared that rapid population growth would fuel social unrest and disrupt US access to critical resources. This view was exemplified by the “Kissinger Report,” a confidential 1974 National Security Study Memorandum, which stated:

...the U.S. economy will require large and increasing amounts of minerals from abroad, especially from less developed countries. That fact gives the U.S. enhanced interest in the political, economic, and social stability of the supplying countries. Wherever a lessening of population pressures through reduced birth rates can increase the prospects for such stability, population policy becomes relevant to resource supplies and to the economic interests of the United States.

Such concerns prompted the US government to launch family planning programs in developing countries in the 1960s and 1970s. On the whole, those programs have had significant benefits for women, children and families; they brought contraception to millions and revolutionized reproductive behavior. But, in the crisis atmosphere provoked by fears of the “population bomb,” too often programs trampled human rights and health in pursuit of lower birthrates. For example, during India’s “emergency period” in the 1970s, thousands were corralled into makeshift camps and sterilized against their will, and hundreds died of botched operations.

And there were seemingly more benign policies of incentives and disincentives, which sometimes had the effect of punishing the poorest and most vulnerable. In India, children were expelled from school if their parents refused to

be sterilized. Other policies forced the poor to make a Hobbesian choice between fertility and survival. In Bangladesh in the 1980s, for example, flood victims who refused sterilization were denied emergency food aid. More typically, family planning clinics that measured their success in “births averted” and “contraceptive acceptors” treated their clients as means to those ends. Clients were often steered toward long-acting contracep-

WHO DECIDES?

Resistance was brewing in other quarters as well. In the 1970s, a resurgent feminist movement rejected population control as an assault on women’s rights and health. Many feminists believe that reproductive autonomy is a cornerstone of women’s self-determination. As Margaret Sanger said, “No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body.” Accordingly, beginning in the 1920s, femi-



Motorcycles are stuck in traffic in Taipei.

tives and sterilization, with little concern for their individual needs and desires.

Such abuses provoked a powerful backlash. Many in the developing countries came to see donor-funded population programs as a means of preserving the inequitable global regime of haves and have-nots. Population programs were also accused of “cultural imperialism”—exporting Western values along with birth control devices. These concerns came to a head at a 1974 UN-sponsored population conference in Bucharest, where the newly-formed Group of 77 non-aligned nations rejected population control and called for a New International Economic Order, declaring that “development is the best contraceptive.”

nists made common cause with Malthusians to launch the family planning movement. But they were always uneasy bedfellows. Many feminists, especially in the global South, came to realize that numbers-driven population programs simply replaced one form of patriarchal control of women’s bodies with another.

In response, feminist reformers took over the family planning movement from within, moving it from a myopic focus on contraception to a broader commitment to women’s health and rights. They argued that family planning programs should be designed to meet the reproductive health needs of women, full stop. They showed that when women have more control over their lives—including

their reproductive destinies—they have healthier, smaller families. This has immediate benefits for women and children, and those benefits reverberate outward to communities, nations and the world.

This new paradigm was endorsed by the international community at the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. At that meeting, the world's nations agreed to place women's rights and health—rather than human numbers—at the center of population policy. Rather than focusing narrowly on “births averted,” the Cairo agreement sought to give women the means and the power to make their own decisions about childbearing—through access to comprehensive reproductive health services, as well as education, empowerment and sustainable development.

connection more than quadrupled between 2005 and 2008. In the wake of September 11, there also has been a resurgence of interest in the intersection of population growth and national security.

Some in the reproductive health field welcome the revived interest in population issues, believing it could mobilize new funding for the Cairo agenda. Others worry that the reemergence of the “p” word will undo the progress made in Cairo, or that concern about climate change and security will create a crisis atmosphere, and demographic concerns will again trump women's rights and health.

Here, then, is the question: should advocates for reproductive rights and health embrace population issues, with their thicket of sensitivities, odious associations and checkered past? Can concern

the extinction of nearly a third of the Earth's species. The wealthiest people and nations, whose carbon emissions have largely caused the problem, may be able to cushion themselves from its worst impacts. But the poorest people in the poorest countries—especially women and children—lack the resources to cope with successive waves of drought, flood and famine. Tragically, those who have done the least to cause the problem of climate change will bear the greatest burden.

While climate change is beginning to get the attention—if not the action—it deserves, few are aware that human activities are threatening the planet's life-support systems in more direct ways. Nearly two-thirds of the planet's ecosystems, including freshwater supplies and fisheries, are being used in ways that simply cannot be sustained. The last

Should advocates for reproductive rights and health embrace population issues, with their thicket of sensitivities, odious associations and checkered past?

In many places, the Cairo agreement spurred a sea change in population policy. But its agenda remains tragically unfinished—largely because the world's nations have failed to muster the necessary resources. As growth rates fell and the “population bomb” was defused, policymakers moved on to other urgent priorities. And, ironically, the very success of the Cairo conference invigorated a backlash from the right; conservative groups have launched sophisticated attacks on the Cairo agenda around the globe. As a result, funding for reproductive health (except HIV/AIDS) has fallen sharply over the last 15 years.

RETURN OF THE “P” WORD

In the years after Cairo, population issues essentially fell off the international agenda. Now that is beginning to change: population issues are coming up again, in the context of climate change and other urgent environmental issues. In the US, media coverage of the population-environment

about population growth be deployed to advance reproductive rights and health, gender equity and social justice?

As a left-leaning feminist who has worked on population and reproductive health issues for two decades, you can be sure I have asked myself these questions more than once. My answers: We should, and it can.

A PIVOTAL MOMENT

We *should* pay attention to population growth because we are living in a pivotal moment—for human beings and the planet that sustains us.

The environmental crises we face today are beyond anything Malthus could have imagined. Our emissions of heat-trapping gases—from burning fossil fuels, agriculture, deforestation and other human activities—are altering the very temperature and chemistry of our planet. The impact of climate change will be profound: widespread famine in Africa and elsewhere, more violent storms and

century has seen staggering improvements in human well-being, although those improvements have been very unequally distributed—fully half of humanity still lives in abject poverty on less than \$2 per day. But as we have transformed natural systems to meet human needs, we have shredded the complex web of plants, animals and biological processes that make the planet habitable.

Is this the long-predicted moment of Malthusian reckoning? That is not certain. But it is clear that this is a defining moment in our relationship with the Earth, the moment when we must learn to live within nature's bounds or risk irreparable damage to the systems that support all life.

At the same time, we are living in a pivotal moment for world population. Right now, the largest generation of young people in human history is coming of age. Nearly half the world's population—some 3 billion people—is under the age of 25. Although fertility rates have



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High rise residential buildings are seen behind a slum in Mumbai, India. India has Asia's third-largest economy. It is home to a quarter of the world's 20 most densely populated cities.

come down everywhere, the sheer size of the current cohort of young people (an echo of the great population boom of the 20th century) ensures the momentum for continued growth well into the future. But the choices those young people make about childbearing, which will depend upon the choices available to them, will determine whether human numbers grow from the current 6.9 billion to anywhere between 8 billion and 11 billion by the middle of the century.

The relationship between population dynamics and environmental quality is not straightforward, as I will explain. Nonetheless, there is strong evidence that it will be easier to meet the challenges of the 21st century with a world population of 8 billion, rather than 11 billion.

BEYOND MALTHUS VS. MARX

Today, we have a much more sophisticated understanding of these issues than

ever before. We have learned that population growth is not the scourge imagined by Malthus and Ehrlich, but it does serve as a multiplier of harmful patterns of production and consumption. Population dynamics can have a significant impact on the natural environment, but that impact is neither linear nor uniform, and it is shaped by a wide range of mediating factors—including technology, consumption patterns, economic policies and political choices.

Most critically, the environmental impact of any given population is shaped by wealth. It is the affluent, slow-growing populations of the industrialized North that bear the lion's share of responsibility for climate change and other environmental problems. Americans, for example, comprise just 5 percent of the world's population but consume 25 percent of its energy. Human numbers are growing most rapidly in the devel-

oping countries of the global South, where per-capita environmental impact is relatively low.

To put population issues in perspective, we need to first step out of the binary debate begun by Malthus and Marx. Then we can see that each side gets some things right. Marx and his inheritors correctly observe that poverty, inequality and environmental degradation are not simply byproducts of population growth, but result from the systemic pursuit of profits and accumulation. And they are right to suggest that more equitable distribution of resources would extend the “carrying capacity” of the planet.

Malthus, on the other hand, was spectacularly wrong about a lot of things, including the potential for increasing agricultural output. But the fundamental Malthusian premise—that nothing can grow forever on a finite planet—has proved prescient. There are limits to

what the planet's support systems will bear, and those limits may be near.

If we hear the truths embedded in this polarized debate, if we take seriously the twin imperatives of sustainability and social justice, several priorities emerge. First, we must address inequality by fostering sustainable human and economic development in the global South. That is likely to entail greater resource use in developing countries. But, since the planet cannot sustain 7 billion people living as we do in the US—much less a future population of 8 or 11 billion—it is crucial that we reduce resource consumption in the affluent countries, and find ways to meet human needs at less environmental cost.

say world population reaches 9 billion, the UN's medium projection, by 2050.

Even in this fantastically rosy scenario, global carbon dioxide emissions would rise to 45 billion tons of CO₂ per year—a 50 percent increase over our current, ruinous level. In this scenario, the difference between a world population of 8 billion and one of 11 billion would be about 15 billion tons of CO₂ per year—half our current emissions and quite possibly the margin between a manageable climate crisis and catastrophe.

In an equitable world, *population matters*. In fact, the only scenario in which population doesn't matter (much) is one where the current inequitable divide between rich and poor remains fixed for

can attain economic security in their own right, they do not need to bear a large number of children to do so.

And Malthus' followers were wrong about the need for coercive population control. In the last 50 years, we have learned that the best way to slow population growth is by making sure that all people have the means and the power to make their own decisions about child-bearing. That means universal access to family planning and other reproductive health services. It also means educating girls and promoting women's rights. And it means ensuring that the young men and women of the largest generation have real choices and opportunities in life.

In other words, all the means to slow

In an equitable world, *population matters*.

Is it all about consumption, then? Do human numbers, per se, really matter for the global environment? In fact, in a sustainable and equitable world, population dynamics are more important, not less. Consider climate change. Today, human beings collectively emit almost 30 billion tons of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide each year. That aggregate figure masks vast disparities in per capita emissions: Americans emit more carbon dioxide per capita than anyone on Earth—about 20 tons per person, per year. Europeans emit about half that, and most sub-Saharan Africans come in at a ton or less. Of course, the atmosphere is indifferent to these disparities; what matters for the climate is the overall number, not the per capita figures.

But let us imagine a more equitable world, in which Americans are able to cut our emissions by three quarters, and Europeans cut theirs in half. While we are at it, let's conjure a massive redistribution of wealth and technology, which enables everyone on Earth to converge at an emissions level of 5 tons per person, per year—about the level of Mexico today. And let's

all time, where the rich continue to prosper and the poor—as in Malthus' feast—are barred from the table.

DON'T FEAR THE "P" WORD

If we agree that slowing population growth is a desirable end, what are the means to achieve it? Many refuse to admit the former because they fear the latter. And with good reason: Malthusian "solutions" to unsustainable population growth—turning a blind eye to starvation and misery, coercive "population control"—are abhorrent.

But history has proven that Malthusian solutions are not just immoral, they are unnecessary. Malthus and his followers believed that aid to poor people (or countries) would merely encourage out-of-control population growth and greater immiseration. In fact, the opposite is true. Where aid spurs economic development and greater affluence, birth rates plummet. Especially effective are investments in child health and women's rights: where parents are confident their children will survive, they have fewer children and invest more in each child; where women

population growth are important ends in themselves. And therein lies the hope that we can finally put the long-running battles over population behind us.

The history of population ideology and policy is important and instructive. And, to paraphrase Faulkner, that history is not even past. Today, a new conversation about population growth is stirring. The Malthusians are speaking up: their voice can be heard in calls for a "carbon tax" on families with more than two children, and in proposals for a global "one child" policy. Garrett Hardin's lifeboat is sailing again, as anti-immigrant groups use environmental arguments to promote their nativist agenda.

Fellow progressives and feminists, don't fear the "p" word. We need to participate in the conversation about population growth, and bring to it our voices, our values, our lived experience. Let's explore the issue with nuance and honesty. And let's work to parlay the new interest in human numbers into renewed commitment to the Cairo agenda—and to reproductive health, rights and justice for all. ■



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A new housing development area is seen with the Melbourne skyline in the distance.

The Return of the Mad Malthusian Scaremongers

By Brendan O'Neill

SUDDENLY, SEEMINGLY OUT of the blue, Malthusianism has become fashionable again. The old links between Malthusian thinking and anti-poor people hysteria, racism and the eugenics movement have been glossed over, and now everyone from trendy feminists to green-leaning activists and from edgy

newspaper columnists to respectable politicians is happy to spout the gospel according to Malthus. You can hardly open a newspaper or switch on the radio these days without hearing someone arguing that the world is jam-packed with Too Many People and “something will have to be done about it.”

There are many problems with the return of Malthusianism, with this rearing, once again, of the ugly head of population scaremongering. Firstly, it

is based on hysteria rather than facts, and it is as wrongheaded as Thomas Malthus himself was when he claimed in the 1790s that food production wouldn't be able to keep pace with poor people's rampant breeding and therefore tens of thousands of people would starve to death. Secondly, it reveals today's glaring lack of social and political imagination, where our inability to envision new ways of organizing society leads us to see everything as finite and babies as little more

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than the users of scarce resources. And thirdly, it interferes with women's reproductive choices, morally pressuring and blackmailing them to limit the number of children they have in the name of "saving the planet."

Malthusians have always been wrong about pretty much everything, and they still are today. The predictions of the original population scaremonger—the weird, underclass-fearing Reverend Thomas Malthus (1766–1834)—proved to be wildly inaccurate. In his "An Essay on the Principle of Population," which remains the bible of many of today's population panickers, the crazy reverend claimed that if people (especially poor people) didn't stop procreating, then "premature death would visit mankind." The demand for food would outstrip

in the 19th century and there still are occasional famines today. Yet these are caused, not by women's baby-making decisions, but by the failure of human society to spread the benefits of industrialization and modernity to the whole world, not just the Western world. In short, poverty and hunger are social and political problems, and therefore are susceptible to social and political solutions, rather than being some kind of punishment from Gaia dished out to speedily-breeding womankind.

Following in the footsteps of their population idol, contemporary Malthusians are as wrong as Malthus was. In 1971, when there were 3.6 billion people on the planet, the American demographer Paul Ehrlich argued in his book "The Population Bomb" that as a result of over-

of China's womb-policing one-child policy, on the basis that "as a result we already have 300 million to 400 million fewer people on the planet." We could do with something similar in Britain, she said, where "one British child pollutes more than 30 children in sub-Saharan Africa do." Other apparently liberal commentators have fretted about the "swelling billions" and asked "Are there just too many people in the world?" On a recent episode of the upmarket BBC Radio 3 discussion program "Nightwaves," Dr. Sue Blackmore, a psychologist, said: "For the planet's sake, I hope we have bird flu or some other thing that will reduce the population, because otherwise we're doomed." And nobody batted an eyelid, demonstrating just how mainstream anti-human fantasies have become.

Malthusians make the schoolboy scientific error of imagining that population is the only variable, the only thing that grows and grows, while everything else—including society, progress and discovery—stays roughly the same.

mankind's ability to supply it, he said, leading to "food shortages, epidemics, pestilence and plagues," which would "sweep off tens of thousands" of people.

Wrong. In fact, in the mid-19th century, shortly after Malthus's essays were published, mankind started to devise ingenious new ways of producing and distributing food. Malthus's problem was that, possessed of a downbeat, pessimistic, anti-human outlook, he couldn't foresee something like the Industrial Revolution, which utterly transformed how humanity makes things and transports them around countries and around the world. Humanity put its mind to the "food problem" and came up with some sweeping solutions, leading to a situation where, today, the planet can hold 6.7 billion people—a number that Malthus could only have dreamt (or rather had nightmares) about; in his day, there were a mere 980 million people on Earth. Of course there were famines

population "hundreds of millions of people will starve to death," leaving Asia and Africa in particular as "wastelands." Thankfully, this scenario remained a mere nightmare in Ehrlich's caliginous brain and never came to pass. A few years ago, Britain's fearmongering Optimum Population Trust, which sinisterly claims that the Earth's carrying capacity is only 2 billion people, warned that "for the whole planet to avoid the fate of Rwanda, Malthusian thinking needs rehabilitation." Yet population levels continue to rise, and lo and behold, no "new Rwandas" have emerged.

Alarming, so-called "progressives" have recently joined the old, white-haired Malthusian brigade in spreading fear about human numbers. In the PC language of environmentalism, liberals and left-wingers are now also spouting neo-Malthusian nonsense. So last year in the British left-leaning *Guardian* newspaper, a feminist—a feminist!—sang the praises

History itself proves Malthus and his contemporary radical, middle-class disciples wrong. In China, for example, there are now more people than there were on the entire planet in the era of Malthus, and yet their lot is better than it was for most of the unfortunate souls alive in the 1790s. In 1949, the population of China was 540 million and average life expectancy was 36.5 years; today the population of China is 1.3 billion and average life expectancy is 73.4 years. Around 235 million Chinese have been lifted out of poverty in the past 15 years alone. All in the most populous nation on Earth, where there are more "mouths to feed" (as Malthusians insultingly refer to human beings) than there were across the entire globe in the period of Malthus's food-shortage panicmongering.

Also, it is often the most densely populated parts of the world where life is good, and the least densely populated parts where life remains hard. So things are

quite nice for the majority of people who live in Manhattan, a tiny island with 1.7 million people crammed on to it. Yet in Africa—much of which, despite what the overpopulation propagandists claim, is sparsely populated—there remain serious social and health problems. Africa contains 11 of the world's 20 least densely populated nations (and only one of the 20 most densely populated), and it is often in the least populated nations that there is widespread poverty and malnutrition. It is not human numbers or overcrowding or “too many black babies” that cause their problems—it is lack of development and progress. To blame women's reproductive habits for social problems is a disgrace.

The reason why Malthusians—both the old anti-underclass brigade and the new eco-speaking crowd—are always wrong is because they have such a narrow, misanthropic outlook on life, and fail to appreciate the fact that mankind frequently remakes society for the better. They make the schoolboy scientific error of imagining that population is the only variable, the only thing that grows and grows, while everything else—including society, progress and discovery—stays roughly the same. That is why Malthus was wrong: he thought an overpopulated planet would run out of food because he could not foresee how industrialization would massively transform society and have an historic impact on how we produce and transport food and many other things. Population is not the only variable. Mankind's vision and growth and his ability to rethink and tackle problems are also variables. Which is why, flying in the face of 200-plus years of mad Malthusian scaremongering, we have managed to create a world that can fairly successfully carry billions of human beings.

Fundamentally, Malthusian thought represents the triumph of pessimism over experimentation and vision. The popularity of Malthusian thinking today springs from a dearth of serious social programs for taking risks to improve the whole of humanity's lot. In essence, people's inability to imagine new ways of organ-

izing society or new ways of delivering affluence and plenty to humankind leads them to view all problems as a consequence of there being limited, finite resources and too many human beings vacuuming them up. In truth, however, the real problem today is the limits that have been imposed on human thinking and ambition, the sustainability-obsessed strait-jacket we have all been forced in to. Once we wriggle free from this, who knows how far we might increase the “carrying

“female empowerment” and “educating poor women.” I fully support the right of women in the developing world, and everywhere else, to have access to contraception and safe and legal abortion services as and when they need them—but it is disingenuous in the extreme for Malthusians to present their programs as a way of giving women choice. When you promote population control on the basis that “too many people” will propel the planet towards “doom,” on the grounds



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capacity” of the Earth and how much we might improve the lives of everyone on the planet, including those so-called “swelling billions” in the developing world.

But perhaps the worst aspect of neo-Malthusianism is its exploitation of the language of “women's choice” and “women's rights” to promote its population-control agenda, especially in the developing world. Understandably mortified about the fact that Malthusianism sprung from a fear and loathing of poor people, and later became bound up with racist ideology and the eugenics movement in the early 20th century, today's Malthusians have learnt to be PC.

Population-control lobbyists and NGOs frequently promote their agenda in the developing world under the guise of

that every new baby is a “resource depletor” who will leave a disgusting and destructive “eco-footprint,” you are not giving women choice; you are giving them an ultimatum: “Stop breeding or the planet gets it.” You are using moral blackmail and fearmongering to coerce them into making “the right choice.”

It's time we flagged up the choice element of being prochoice—which means we should support a woman's right to have no children, to have two children or to have ten children. It should be nobody's business but her own and her family's, and prochoice activists should be at the forefront of challenging the new Malthusian movement which poses as being proempowerment but is really about scaring women into childlessness. ■



Diarmuid Martin, now archbishop of Dublin and primate of Ireland, lead the Vatican's delegation to the Cairo conference in 1994. He is pictured here with Pope John Paul II in 1999.

The Holy See at Cairo

WHAT THE CATHOLIC HIERARCHY DID AT THE
1994 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

By Alex Marshall

“THIS IS REALLY A CONFERENCE about life styles,” said Monsignor Diarmuid Martin, “And when talking about life styles in the future of the society

ALEX MARSHALL has written extensively on population and development issues.

we have a lot to say.” Most people who were in Cairo for the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) thought that they were discussing women’s lives, not just their lifestyles. The lives of the half-million pregnant women who die every year, for example, many of whom didn’t

want to be pregnant in the first place.

On the other hand, the church hierarchy certainly did say a great deal before, during and after the conference; but the church’s influence is another matter.

It isn’t perhaps surprising that Msgr. Martin (now, for his sins, the archbishop

of Dublin and primate of Ireland) should want to emphasize lifestyle issues. The hierarchy has historically cast itself as the great bulwark of the family against the onrushing tide of secularism and sexual license. To the hierarchy, the family means children, lots of them. The hierarchy also has rigorously opposed abortion, taking a life-begins-at-conception approach. A corollary is that the life of the “unborn child,” from a collection of a few cells to a full-term fetus, takes precedence over the life of the woman in whom it is growing, every time.

The extraordinary 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, with its total ban on artificial methods of contraception, also plays

dations and drafts of the proposed Programme of Action.

In a sense the ICPD was the end product of 20 years of debate, including two previous world conferences, innumerable smaller meetings and a great deal of work on the ground. In United Nations terms, or maybe even human ones, that isn’t long. The United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA, only exists because back in 1970 no other part of the United Nations would touch population with a bargepole. It might involve family planning and that meant controversy. Back then many, even most, UN member states viewed family planning with a very dubious eye. After the word population in their minds came

Reproductive health was promptly misrepresented to mean abortion by the mainly American groups opposed to family planning and gender equality. They took the United States domestic controversy over abortion to the international stage and successive Republican presidents denied funding to UNFPA and the International Planned Parenthood Federation on the grounds that they supported abortion.

In 1992, however, with Bill Clinton as president, the United States took the lead in UN preparations for the Cairo conference. The Holy See delegation to the UN prepared for action. The Vatican and its allies, notably Opus Dei, had successfully shot down a move to

The collision between papal authority and the real world has never been clearer than at ICPD.

an important role in this story. The historian Garry Wills, who is a Catholic, believes that defense of the document now forms the intellectual bedrock on which the church is founded, so that it is simply impossible to revisit this teaching (see for example his book “Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit” and his review article “High Fidelity” in the *New York Review of Books* on Dec. 5, 2002). According to Wills, nearly all Catholics ignore the Vatican’s teachings on contraception and (to a lesser extent) on abortion.

The collision between papal authority and the real world has never been clearer than at ICPD. Of course it could be said that United Nations conferences hardly represent the real world either—but this one featured 10,000 official delegates from 179 countries (or 180 counting the Holy See—more on that later), 4,000 people from 1,500 NGOs and another 4,000 journalists. It was the culmination of two years of preparations, including five regional conferences and two full-dress preparatory committees, which produced various recommen-

the word control—a policy various (mostly Western) deep thinkers were advocating at the time. In their minds the word that came after population was explosion, something that happened only in developing countries (rather than say, Florida, where population growth in the 1970s approached 4 percent a year, much faster than any developing country).

By 1994, the whole picture had changed. Nearly every country in the world except Saudi Arabia promoted or at least permitted family planning. Thanks in good part to UNFPA’s leader, Nafis Sadik, and the growing strength of civil society, especially the women’s movement, the emphasis of international discussion had moved from demographic policy to health policy, with women at its centre. The term reproductive health came into wide use in the 1980s, to describe the package of health measures including family planning that women need to avoid unwanted pregnancy, ensure safe motherhood and protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections.

include population in discussions at the 1992 Earth Summit on environment (a decision that still reverberates) and were more than ready for the next collision.

Why does the Holy See, alone among religious organizations, enjoy observer status at the UN, with the right to participate, if not vote, in its deliberations? The Holy See has some of the attributes of a state. It occupies (a very small) territory. It sends and receives ambassadors. It even issues stamps. All that was enough to secure membership in the Universal Postal Union back in the days of the League of Nations. With that as leverage, the Holy See secured observer status when the United Nations was founded in 1945. (The full story is told in the Catholics for Choice publication, “The Catholic Church at the United Nations: Church or State?”)

The Vatican has diplomatic relations with most countries in the world and sends a papal nuncio or apostolic delegate to represent its interests. He is more than just an ambassador. In many countries he represents the will of God. The repre-

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sentative at the UN, Archbishop Francis Assisi Chullikatt, gives the Vatican a lot more leverage there than other observers, such as, say, Palestine. In the run-up to the ICPD, this influence was used systematically to gain countries' support for the Vatican position. In one flagrant case during the UN preparatory committee, a member of a national delegation who was deeply involved in the negotiations was replaced with someone more compliant overnight, at the behest of the country's nuncio. The committee chairman, however, refused to countenance the change. Both actions were remarkable, if not unprecedented, and indicate the depth of feeling and the extent of the maneuvering that surrounded the negotiations.

Such skullduggery indicated that Msgr. Martin was serious when he talked about lifestyles. Pope John Paul II wrote to every head of state asserting that the draft document promoted an individualistic lifestyle incompatible with marriage that would condemn marriage to obsolescence. Ambassadors to the Holy See were called in and lectured on the Vatican position on abortion and contraception. Nafis Sadik as secretary-general of the ICPD conference was granted an audience at which the pope berated her for her unwillingness to steer the process in the right direction, as he saw it. At the end of the audience, the official photographer who invariably records such occasions was somehow absent. In address after address, the pope denounced the conference as a "plot to destroy the family" and "the snare of the devil" promoting a "culture of death."

Seeking alliances, the Holy See made a *démarche* (diplo-speak for a strategic move) towards predominantly Muslim nations and organizations. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops (the forerunner to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) and the American Muslim Council for example issued a joint statement on abortion. The Vatican and states like Iran and Libya developed an interesting common front against abortion, contraception and ster-

ilization—interesting because Iran at the time was vigorously promoting contraception and sterilization for its own people, and because Libya, hitherto quite liberal on these issues, needed international assistance (which the Vatican has denied giving) after the Libyan government was alleged to have been involved in the bombing of an airplane over the Scottish town of Lockerbie. At the conference itself, an unofficial Arabic translation of the draft document mysteriously appeared, in which key phrases were rendered in unusual ways. "Sexual health" for example, was translated using a term implying immoral behavior.

All to no avail. In Cairo, with vocal support from "the monstrous regiment of women" (Calvinist John Knox, not His Holiness) at the parallel NGO Forum, the great progressive majority had its way. Refusing to strike their colors, the Holy See and its few allies held up the conference for five days over one paragraph referring to abortion, backing down only when language was agreed to the effect that abortion was not to be promoted as a means of family planning—which wasn't in many people's minds anyway. In the end, the Vatican reserved its position on adolescent sexual health and some other issues, but otherwise joined the consensus.

A tame end to a pitched battle—or perhaps the hierarchy was simply keeping its powder dry. In July 2010, Nafis Sadik gave the keynote address at a national conference on sexual and reproductive health in Dili, Timor Leste, a strongly Catholic country. Bishop Basilio do Nascimento stated that he supported the national program to ensure universal access to reproductive health information and services.

"I don't think their position has essentially changed," said Dr Sadik after the Dili conference. "But I'm very happy that they joined the consensus, just as they did, eventually, at ICPD." Last year, the same bishop had opposed passage of a law that permits emergency abortion to save the life of a woman. ■

The Pope's Scientists

POPULATION,
THE FINITE WORLD
AND HUMAN DIGNITY

By Robert Engelman

IT SOUNDS LIKE A RIDDLE: HOW many scientists does it take to change a pope's mind about human population growth? More, apparently, than work for him. And some scientists do. In June 1994, three months before the opening of the UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences surprised its Vatican patron by concluding that advances in life-saving technologies "have made it unthinkable to sustain indefinitely a birth rate that notably exceeds the level of two children per couple."

Replacement fertility (the number of children women must have on average to eventually bring about a steady-state population) is, the advisory group insisted, "the requirement to guarantee the future of humanity." Pope John Paul II immediately distanced himself from the report and made sure the news media registered his disapproval.

As good scientists, the independent-minded experts were speaking truth to

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Some have blamed increasing population levels for environmental degradation.

power, while John Paul responded with papal fallibility. On a finite planet, no tree can grow to the sky, and no species can grow infinitely. One can argue about where limits lie. (Many population growth promoters do, calculating that all of humanity could squeeze into Texas, with room for rattlesnakes to spare. They don't mention water, however.) One can debate whether, when or how it is appropriate to try to nudge birth rates down toward long-term sustainability. But math is math, and sometimes math is Malthusian. The world is physical and biological, not merely economic and technological, so human population growth will someday—and somehow—end.

A decade into the third millennium, the theoretical has emerged once again into real-world debate. With a billion human beings malnourished (equivalent to the world's population when Thomas Robert Malthus first wrote on the topic

in the late 18th century), with the global thirst for energy flattening mountains and spewing oil into oceans and with experts stumped at how to sustain 6.8 billion-plus human beings without overheating the planet, population growth is once again a public issue.

We can try to evade the discomfort of the topic by focusing on *too much consumption*, a more satisfying object of blame than *too many people*. But consumption, unequal as it is, remains more a behavioral expression of our numbers than their symmetrical opposite. Consider, for example, the fact that India is now tossing away 500,000 tons of obsolete electronic gear every year, a number projected to double in just two years. Or that the subcontinent's cook stoves send enough "black carbon"—soot, essentially—into the atmosphere to contribute significantly to the melting of the Himalayan glaciers. Or that water scarcity in eastern and

southern Africa has far more to do with growing local demand than with shifts in rainfall generated by human-induced climate change.

Granted, the small families of the industrialized countries have for decades used many times more resources per capita than the large families of most developing countries. It's a fundamental unfairness the world has yet to begin to grapple with—and no long-term climate agreement will win support from all the world's

millions of consumers in the world's wealthy countries—is for per-capita consumption to jump just after population growth rates have crested and begun moving down against the backdrop of unprecedented population size. For long-term environmental sustainability, it is essential to act on both population and consumption (not to mention technology)—not as alternatives but as components of a strategy, not in sequence but simultaneously. The dangers we face as a

always will. For many people around the world, to suggest that an excess of births is a driver of environmental degradation is to reject the value and beauty of babies, children and human life itself.

The challenge is to move away from simplistic either/or thinking and frameworks of blame in addressing population and its connections to development and environmental sustainability. New frames are emerging based on human rights, autonomy, capacity, potential and dignity. Leaving aside the occasional fringe view, no one is seriously proposing suicide, genocide or an end to childbearing or to the species. The dominant paradigm is instead based on the value of enduring human presence on the planet and the all-important need to prevent a slowing of population growth through rising death rates. (“I want as large a human population as possible,” biologist and population writer Paul Ehrlich once said, “just over time.”)

There is one central principle in this approach to population, and it can serve as a confidence-building test among potential allies from different backgrounds who might consider joint action on population, development and environment. Stated negatively, that principle is: no coercion in addressing births and fertility. Stated positively, it is: *intentional parenting*. Mainstream and centrist organizations working in population from a public health perspective without exception frame this in terms that few people can disagree with: What harm is done, and how much good can be gained in so many arenas, when all women everywhere are fully able to choose at each step of their reproductive lives whether and when to become pregnant?

The available statistics are less than absolutely certain but encouraging nonetheless. At least 215 million women, based on survey work in developing countries, are sexually active and do not want to become pregnant, yet are not using effective contraception. (Given high proportions of unintended pregnancies even in wealthy countries like the United States, millions of women in developed countries probably fall into this category as well, but they are not counted compa-



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Increased demands for agricultural land had led to deforestation.

nations without addressing this inequity. Yet rich countries multiply their lavish resource use with vast and still-growing populations, making their numbers an issue for them as well. And developing countries are now in the position of undermining their own and the global environment with per capita consumption levels that, while modest, are climbing rapidly at the same time that large and expanding populations multiply the impact.

Indeed, an awkward aspect of consumption is that at even the most modest levels population growth can push its consequences to ever higher plateaus, overwhelming any successes achieved by living more simply or efficiently. The common pattern—as with the computers of India, and much earlier with the hundreds of

species on a living planet are simply too great to ignore a factor as important as our numbers.

The difficulty is in assessing the urgency of action on population and what such action might look like. The 1994 disagreement between Pope John Paul II and his scientists hints at the problem. The scientists saw the imperative of reaching replacement fertility. The pope had to reject that imperative out of fear its acceptance would undermine his vision of humanity as the crown of a divine creation subject to a divine command not to interfere unnaturally with reproduction. Even leaving aside disagreements over whether contraception and abortion are sinful, this difference in worldviews has long frustrated progress on population and quite possibly

rably.) If the governments of the world could make this “unmet need” a rare thing, according to calculations by Scott Moreland and colleagues at the Futures Group in Washington, DC, it is likely that world population growth would come closer to the United Nations Population Division’s low variant projection by mid-century rather than the oft-cited medium one. The medium projection foresees 9.15 billion people on earth in 2050, based on a no-surprise scenario of continuation of current trends in birth and death rates. The low variant projection foresees 8 billion.

Or consider the estimated 75 million unintended or mistimed pregnancies that occur annually in developing countries. If this number, or the unknown higher total for the world as a whole, ever approached zero, it’s likely that world population growth rates would fall by roughly half and eventually move into modestly negative territory, leading to a world population size that could be drifting downward before the century’s midpoint. Put in other words, the pope’s scientists would get their wish: birth rates indefinitely sustainable on the finite planet.

A few caveats are needed about this likely outcome, however. One is that today’s global replacement fertility rate is, at more than 2.3 children per woman, well above the commonly understood rate of 2 or 2.1 children. Tragically, many young people die before their own reproduction, and in some large countries anti-female bias skews sex ratios toward a preponderance of males. Fortunately, the same basket of reproductive healthcare services that enable women to have wanted childbirths in safety and health, and the policies that elevate women’s status to promote intentional childbearing, should also help bring replacement fertility to its ideal level of just over two children per woman. But that means the global replacement fertility rate will be moving lower even while the world’s actual fertility rate chases it from above.

A second caveat is that population strategies based on avoiding unintended pregnancies do not directly address migration, the third demographic force after births

and deaths. From a global population perspective, this may not matter much. But from environmental and national perspectives migration matters very much—and engages yet another landscape of difficult issues around human rights and dignity.

Thirdly, and most importantly for this discussion, uncertainty remains about both the magnitude of unintended pregnancy and the best mix of strategies both for making it rare and for downshifting those

the means with which we should hasten an end to that growth through lower birth rates that result from intentional childbearing. These uncertainties are a good basis for humility, but not for inaction. As long as the common objective is the prevention of unintended pregnancy and the commitment is collective and ironclad to reject reproductive coercion in all its manifestations, we should have safe ground on which most—even if not the pope—can stand.



Technological innovation means that computers become outdated at an increasing rate.

family size norms that yield desired above-replacement fertility in many populations. The core strategies are agreed upon: better access to client-focused voluntary family planning services, education attainment at least part way through secondary school for girls and improved economic and social status for women and girls. But which among these deserve the highest priority and policy attention remains contentious.

Figuring out how to prevent unintended pregnancies is far more vital to the future than the fruitless debate about whether population or consumption contributes more to the world’s environmental problems. The uncertainty about where environmental or other limits to population growth lie finds symmetry in our uncertainty about the urgency and

The scale of the human presence on the planet puts at risk our health, our well-being and potentially our very survival. The challenge is to face this squarely, and then envision and move resolutely forward with population strategies that do not react to fear but rather raise hope, and that do not assign blame but develop human capacities and elevate human dignity. We are in the best position in history to side with the pontifical scientists in the conviction that replacement fertility is the necessary guarantor of the human future. We now have the means and most of the information we need. We can bring replacement, wanted and actual fertility into a harmony of low numbers, based on the childbearing intentions of women and men, which can sustain us all. ■