

Are We Too Many?

Some Questions About the Population Question

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Are we too many? Few questions have sparked such heated debate in environmental political thought. It is a question that highlights fundamental tensions between humans and the environment, or people and resources. It stems from a belief that there is imbalance in the natural order and a profound sense of fear for the future of life on earth. It is a politically-charged 'can of worms' that gets opened up at particular times of crisis, such as the food riots of the late 18th century, the oil shocks of the 1970s and most recently with the grim predictions of climate change. It is a question that is often met with scepticism (and worse) from those who think it is a red herring issue that is at odds with principles of social justice and human rights. A growing number of environmentalists have recently argued that the progressive left is wrong to put concerns about human rights ahead of the urgent need to address ecological problems of serious global proportions.

No matter which side of the debate one identifies with, it is important to accept that 'are we too many?' is neither a straightforward scientific nor politically innocent question. It is loaded with assumptions and value judgements and is part of a discourse that does a very particular job of ideological work. As such, it ought to be unpacked carefully and examined critically. I suggest that looking at the assumptions, values and motives behind the question can tell us more about the issue than any answer that might be offered. In this short piece, I do not propose to answer to the question 'are we too many?' but instead to ask four questions about the question itself. These are: i) what are the implications of the phrase 'too many'? ii) why ask this particular question? iii) who is 'we'? and iv) how will the answer be used? These questions may help to deconstruct the issue in a way that not only prompts critical thinking but also renders the task of answering the question with certainty almost impossible. If readers go away asking even more questions about this perennial population question, then I will have accomplished my aim.

What are the implications of the phrase ‘too many’?

On the surface, ‘are we too many?’ may read like an open question, but the phrase ‘too many’ sets the terms of the debate. ‘*Too many*’ implies that a judgement can and should be made about the desirable amount of something, and that there is an optimum number that can be used as a reference point against which to judge the number in question. ‘Are we too many?’ presupposes that there is a ‘right’ number of people. The epistemological dimension of the population issue is therefore unavoidable. Can we know what the optimum number of people is? If so, how? Where does the number come from? Nature? Science? God? Thomas Malthus, clergyman, economist, and founder of the concept of overpopulation in 1798, based his predictions about human populations outgrowing their food supply on what he believed to be God’s plan. His pessimistic views about the human capacity to reproduce beyond natural limits, if unchecked by external forces, were very much a product of his Christian views about the laws of nature (cf. Worster, 1994).

When the question is asked by modern environmentalists, this ‘right number’ is always presented as the outcome of a mathematical calculation, involving human numbers, available resources, available space, levels of consumption and amount of pollution generated. Contemporary neo-Malthusian greens appeal not to God but to the environmental sciences to present their truth-claims about the natural limits, the ‘carrying capacity’ of the planet (cf. Ehrlich and Ehrlich 2008). They use the method of ‘ecological footprinting’ to measure the amount of land and water resources needed (both in terms of consumption and assimilation of waste) to sustain a given population using prevailing technology, assuming current lifestyles. Ecological footprint statistics are used to assess sustainable population sizes and more often to judge current populations to be unsustainable. The world’s population is fast approaching the 7 billion mark and is projected to peak at around 9 billion by 2050. There are conflicting predictions, but there is a consensus that population growth of this degree will put unsustainable pressure on the earth’s resources. More people means increased use of carbon-intensive energy and much greater demand for food and living space. Many argue that there is no

hope of reversing the trend of global warming if the numbers of people keep growing at the current rate. Framed in this way, the obvious solution is to reduce the numbers from 'too many' to 'just right'. For example, the UK-based 'green think tank', Optimum Population Trust (OPT)¹ uses the ecological footprinting method to calculate a 5.1 billion maximum for a sustainable world population and around 3 billion as the optimum number. So 7 billion is definitely too many by half.

The main implication of the phrase 'too many' is that the issue boils down to numbers. But this implication ought to be questioned, especially since it is possible to debate the numbers, to find flaws in the basic Malthusian formula and hard evidence that world population is actually declining or growing at a much slower pace than is often claimed. There are many who argue that the numerical evidence presented for linking environmental change and population growth is not scientific truth but is highly contested and inconclusive (Hynes, 1999; Seager 2000). Another response is to question whether we should take it as given that the numbers are the point at all. There is a counter-argument that numbers are of little use if one wants to understand the complex social factors and relationships that determine changes in birth, death, migration rates and the overall impact of people on their environment. As Joni Seager (2000: 1721) writes,

...the numbers alone do not contribute much to environmental explanation. What environmental stresses are imposed by sheer numbers of people? Well, it is hard to say without a more nuanced analysis. One hundred lentil-eating, bicycle-riding, solar-powered people are going to put less pressure on the environment than one hundred beef-eating, car-driving, fossil-fuel-dependent people. There is only the loosest correlation between numbers of people and environmental stress.

In this light, it is worth asking whether the question 'are we too many?' is useful for explaining the causes of environmental unsustainability or for making meaningful predictions, much less for informing policy. If it isn't, then why ask it?

¹ The OPT includes among its membership some of the most prominent environmentalists and scientists in the UK and globally, including Sir Jonathon Porritt, Jane Goodall, Sir David Attenborough, Paul Ehrlich and Sir Crispin Tickell. See <http://www.optimumpopulation.org/index.html> and the article by Andy Lockhart in this issue for a more detailed discussion of the organisation. The OPT's explanation of how they used ecological footprinting to arrive at their sustainable and optimal numbers is at: <http://www.optimumpopulation.org/opt.optimum.html>).

Why ask this particular question?

An approach that is commonly used in critical discourse analysis is to consider what political function a particular piece of text, like a question, serves. One can start to uncover the function by asking questions like 'what ideological work does this question do?' (Fairclough, 1992). Why ask this particular question rather than another? What *is not being asked* because this question has been put before us?

Those who ask 'are we too many?' tend to do so rhetorically and assume an affirmative answer. The question itself is a product of neo-Malthusian ideology, which for the past forty years has taken as given that overpopulation is the most serious problem facing the planet. Neo-Malthusians ascribe to a particular ideological position and their political agenda is to spread the word that overpopulation is leading to ecological collapse. As John Dryzek (2005) explains in *The Politics of the Earth*, in the 1960s and 1970s environmentalism was dominated by the discourse of 'limits' which was driven by apocalyptic visions of a precariously overpopulated lifeboat earth. Biologist Paul Ehrlich's best-selling book *The Population Bomb* (1968) presented population growth as having greater destructive power than nuclear weapons. Invoking the dismal predictions of Malthus, many environmentalists warned that surpassing the planet's carrying capacity would bring certain conflicts, mass starvation, pandemics and other tragedies. Comparing population growth to a cancer, some early environmentalists advocated authoritarian government, voluntary human extinction, and compulsory sterilisation in developing countries as possible solutions (Ophuls, 1977). In the 1980s deep ecologists (e.g., members of *Earth First!*) argued that humans should be regarded as a parasite on the earth and that their numbers should be reduced by 90 per cent. In the 1990s the ideology found its way onto to national and international policy agendas when some prominent scholars made links between national security and environmental degradation. Environmental security writers like Thomas Homer-Dixon (1999) and Robert Kaplan (1994) presented their Hobbesian visions of the war and violence that would inevitably result from population-induced resource scarcity. Although the argument has a very long history and has never been allowed to die, many contemporary neo-Malthusians, like Sir Jonathon Porritt (former Chair of the UK Sustainable Development Commission, Patron of the OPT

and Visiting Professor in SPIRE, Keele University), assert that the question needs urgent attention because it has been ignored for too long (Porritt 2009). They present it as the single most important question that environmentalists should be asking in the wake of global climate change.

This implies that other questions are relatively less important or should not get asked with as much enthusiasm or urgency by neo-Malthusians. Here we can note that ‘are we too many?’ is privileged over such questions as ‘are we consuming too much?’, ‘is there a fair distribution of the earth’s resources?’ and ‘why do people have children?’ It is not unreasonable to suggest that perhaps they are not prioritising these questions because they do not believe that it is desirable or possible to reduce consumption or redistribute wealth. They may well believe that economic growth is necessary for alleviating poverty, but perhaps they also believe it to be more acceptable to question people’s ‘freedom to breed’ than their freedom to shop. David Nicholson-Lord (2009) of the OPT admits as much when he suggests that campaigns for reducing population rather than consumption would rehabilitate the green movement’s reputation for joyless survivalism. He writes:

Consider two Planet Earths – one of nine billion people with x amount of “consumption”, the other of one billion with $9x$ consumption. Bear in mind that the world of nine billion may be more inventive, but also more pressured and stressful, less spacious. Bear in mind particularly that often, by “consumption”, we mean activities which for many people, laudably or not, make life worth living – holidays, hobbies, travel, freedom to choose. In the modern environmentalist’s formulation, both worlds are the same. In practice, they are not; there are choices to be made. Shouldn’t we be making them, and urgently?

Suspicious of the values and motivations behind the current wave of neo-Malthusianism, environmental commentator George Monbiot (2009) writes:

I can’t help noticing that at least nine out of ten of [those who want to put overpopulation on the political agenda] are postreproductive, middle-class white men. They come from a group which is, in other words, more responsible for environmental destruction than any other class in history. Their consumption of just about every known resource outweighs that of most of the world’s people put together. There’s just one major issue for which they aren’t to blame: current increases in population. And – wouldya believe it? – this is the one they want to talk about.

Monbiot, and many other environmentalists, agree that the size of the human population in many parts of the world puts potentially unsustainable pressure on finite resources, but at the same time believe that levels of consumption in the overdeveloped world is a more pressing issue. They note that the rate of population growth pales by comparison to levels of consumption and rates of economic growth that (recent global downturn notwithstanding) have not been the subject of such urgent debate

among neo-Malthusians. Comparing their rates and impacts Monbiot (2008) says that 'economic growth this century could be 32 times as big an environmental issue as population growth.'

Many greens are suspicious of the 'are we too many?' question because they believe that it is not human numbers that are important, but the relative consumption of natural resources and production of wastes and green house gasses. Some suggest that the earth can sustain a population of 9 billion people or even more if that population adopted a less energy-intensive lifestyle based on clean sources of energy rather than fossil fuels. How this future scenario might be achieved is a very difficult question to answer. One must admit that asking the population question enables the asker to avoid these complex social issues that are potentially more difficult to grapple with than changing sheer numbers. Perhaps that is why it has been so popular.

Who is 'we'?

To my mind the question of 'who is we' in 'are we too many?' is so obvious that it almost speaks for itself. But it is worth mentioning briefly because it enables me to raise a very important feature of the population debate within environmental politics. This is the division between those who view humanity as one big We and those who want to be more precise (historically, socially, politically) about who is meant by 'We' in any given claim about human species and its relationship to, or impact on, the natural environment. Part of this desired precision necessarily involves an analysis of the historic divide between the beneficiaries and the 'victims' of capitalist economic development.

It has been said that modern environmentalism, a product of the affluent West, tends to present the crisis of unsustainability as if we're all in this lifeboat together: that we are equally responsible, equally doomed and so must all change 'our' ecologically destructive ways. The OPT website provides a good example of this rhetoric: 'We are rapidly destabilising our climate and destroying the natural world on which we depend for future life.' Environmental justice scholars (critics of colonialism and environmental racism) and ecofeminist scholars are quick to point out that rich people are and always have been more to blame for environmental abuse and destruction than poor people (Bandarage, 1999; Seager, 2000). It is inaccurate and unjust to cover up the disparities of wealth,

power and responsibility with a universal 'We'. Rich people in affluent countries have far greater impact on the planet than poor people regardless of where they live. A useful illustration: 'to be responsible for as many [green house] gas emissions as one British person, a Cambodian woman would need to have 262 children' (Hari, 2008). This is why the 'who is we' question must be asked -- and answered.

A related point is that when neo-Malthusians talk about rapid and dangerous population growth, they are actually not referring to a universal 'We' but to a very particular 'they'. Given that the population of most affluent European countries is in decline, the 'We' who are too many come from developing countries where the rates of growth are still relatively high. The poor in the developing world – who are discursively homogenised and positioned as unable to control their fertility – become the targets for so called 'family planning', sex education and the testing of new contraceptive technologies. The OPT does not criticise countries like Singapore for implementing pro-natalist policies designed to increase their native-born (i.e., non-immigrant) population. In fact they advocate voluntary population reduction strategies for all countries in the world '*except in EU states with very low fertility rates*',² presumably because there aren't too many of them. The point here is that it is important to question the hidden yet unavoidable 'us and them' implications of the 'are we too many?' question. As philosopher of science Ian Hacking (1990: 22) notes, in spite of its veneer of mathematical objectivity and universal 'We' discourse, the politics of 'us and them' has always been present in the population debate.

The "population problem" denotes both the population explosion of *other peoples* and too low a birth rate of *one's own people*. During the 19th century in France, one's own people were French, the others German and British. In Prussia, ... the others were Jewish. Today the others are the Third World. In late-Victorian England, the others were the labouring classes. [my emphasis]

How will an answer to the question be used?

Finally, it is important to consider how the answers to the population question will be used, particularly to inform government policies and priorities. As noted earlier the question 'are we too many?' is not a politically innocent one. It is a can of worms, constructed in a way that sets up a rather

² See <http://www.optimumpopulation.org/opt.policies.html> for more information.

unfortunate choice between 'yes' or 'no' answers, each with rather problematic implications for politics and policy. Neo-Malthusian greens like Porritt and Nicholson-Lord are critical of environmentalists who appear to question the issue, claiming that the population problem has fallen off the agenda for political, rather than scientific, reasons. They present this avoidance as the result of 'wilful ignorance' (Nicholson-Lord, 2009) and of the power of political correctness to silence rational debate. They say that progressive left greens are now too afraid to address it because they fear being labelled racist or imperialist. There is also the allegation that the liberal human rights agenda has unwisely been allowed to trump issues of survival. This recent argument echoes the one made by Garrett Hardin who in 1968 criticised the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights for including both equality and reproductive rights, what he called the 'intolerable freedom to breed': 'to couple the concept of freedom to breed with the belief that everyone has an equal right to the commons is to lock the world into a tragic course of action. Unfortunately this is just the course of action that is being pursued by the United Nations' (in Smith, 1999: 256).

Is it true that a significant number of environmentalists do not ask the 'are we too many?' question because they are 'gutless' (Nicholson-Lord, 2009), irrational or naïve about sustainability? Looking beyond the neo-Malthusian hyperbole, one can see that most environmentalists acknowledge that growing numbers of people who might follow in the footsteps of the affluent West will present a serious problem for the planet. The reason many choose not to 'go there' is because they are not willing to entertain the types of answers it necessarily brings. Framed as a 'yes or no' proposition, the question leads to extremely problematic ethical and political consequences and makes for some rather strange bedfellows.

If one says, 'no, we aren't too many', then one has the options of either embracing population growth as 'natural' (therefore not up to us to change) or to deny the scientific evidence that there is an unsustainable number of humans for the planet's carrying capacity. Worse, one risks immediately being lumped into anti-environmentalist or Cornucopian camps of 'overpopulation deniers'. Neo-liberal and libertarian anti-environmentalists (who are also climate change deniers) tend to reject the claim that there is a population problem and take great delight in holding up green arguments for population control as evidence of environmentalism's totalitarian and misanthropic tendencies. For

example UK *Daily Mail* columnist Melanie Phillips (2009) uses this kind of anti-green rhetoric to refute Porritt's arguments about overpopulation and the need to reduce family size:

Reproduction is humanity's strongest instinct. To seek to curb it is to interfere with one of our most fundamental freedoms and desires. To do so on the basis that Jonathon Porritt possesses unique insight into the needs of our world which is denied to the lesser mortals who inhabit it is not just monumental arrogance — it is also the delusion of totalitarian tyrants from Stalin to Hitler to Mao.

There are also the so called Cornucopians (also sometimes called Prometheans) who deny the existence of an environmental crisis believing at the same time that technology and progress will solve all 'our' problems (cf. Dryzek, 2005). The late economist (and arch-enemy of Paul Ehrlich) Julian Simon is a good example of someone who believed that increasing population was a sign of economic vigour, which drove the technological advances needed to solve any potential resource problems. The ultimate resource, according to him (and many others), is human ingenuity. Technologies such as those that can increase food supply, namely genetically modified crops, are given as example of how human inventions can meet any resource challenge.³ Given the anti-environmental implications of a 'no' answer, it is reasonable to assume that most environmentalists would be more inclined to answer 'yes'.

And if one says 'yes, we are too many', then what? Then one must venture into the terrain of population control and reduction. Here is where one needs to think about the ethical and political consequences of asking the question. To begin with, it is impossible to think about population control without recognizing the brutal, racist history of eugenics movements, with which environmentalists have had some rather uncomfortable connections (e.g., Julian Huxley, founder of the World Wildlife Fund, was also a president of the Eugenics Society). Extreme measures, including forced sterilization of poor, racialised, 'sexually deviant' and disabled people, were acceptable to eugenicists who believed it necessary to control the size and quality of national populations. While most neo-Malthusian environmentalists are against eugenics and say they would rather population control happened voluntarily, they are also usually willing to entertain the need for compulsion and coercion

³ It should be pointed out, however, that many of the people who warn about overpopulation also support the urgent search for and use of high-tech solutions. For example, both ex-Chief Scientists of the UK, Sir David King and Dr Nina Fedoroff (a top science advisor to Hilary Clinton) have gone public with their common position is that the world needs GM foods in order to sustain its already unsustainable population (Duke 2009).

as a last resort. For example Paul Ehrlich (1968: xii) wrote in *The Population Bomb* that reductions in population would happen ‘...hopefully through changes in our value system, but by compulsion if voluntary methods fail.’ Similarly, the OPT does not rule out coercive population policies, like China’s one-child rule, but recommends them as a last resort (see Guillebaud, 2007).⁴ What that might mean for democratic nations and their citizens, they don’t say.

It is also difficult to agree that ‘we are too many’ without getting involved in questions about immigration. Here we find that many prominent environmentalists in the UK are making similar anti-immigration arguments to those made by right-wing groups like Migration Watch and the British National Party. Members of the OPT and growing numbers of advisors to the UK government accept that the rate of population growth must be controlled, which means reducing net migration even if that means closing down the borders and turning immigrants away. The OPT calculates a sustainable population for the UK to be between 17 and 27 million. More radical than the OPT, both The Alliance for a Sustainable USA and The Carrying Capacity Network call for a moratorium on immigration into the country (particularly by Mexicans), citing its role in exacerbating all social and environmental problems (unemployment, energy crisis, homeland insecurity).⁵ Environmental justice activists and scholars have understandably wanted to avoid making these kinds of arguments because they believe them to be racist and a xenophobic – what some have called ‘the greening of hate’ (Hartmann, 1999; Urban, 2007). For many this position is incompatible with their understanding of the principles of environmental justice and so they want no part of any conversation that moves in that direction.

There are, of course, less extreme implications of a ‘yes’ answer to the population question, and some policy recommendations that might be regarded as progressive. The OPT, it must be said, makes it very clear that their approach to population control involves better education and health care and equal rights for women in developing countries, along with the worldwide promotion of the choice to have fewer children as an act of good environmental citizenship. The link is almost always made

⁴ China has had a one-child per couple policy for the past 30 years. It is well known that the policy resulted in forced abortions, female infanticide, and a large number of girls being adopted by Western families. In recent years, in some heavily urbanised parts of the country, the policy has backfired and led to a shortage of younger workers to keep the economy going and to support an ageing population. In cities like Shanghai there is now a policy to give financial incentives to couples who are willing to have a second child (Branigan 2009).

⁵ See <http://www.asustainableusa.org/> and <http://www.carryingcapacity.org/> for more information.

between high fertility rates and the low status of women in society, particularly in developing countries. There is recognition that, even in the UK, intersections of sexism and poverty may be responsible for the highest teenage pregnancy rate in all of Europe. There is also a minor 'movement' to promote the concept of 'Stop at 2' in places like the UK, supported by environmental arguments about the unsustainable consumption levels of the affluent (Jowit, 2007). The OPT website even asks people to sign an online pledge to reduce their family size for the following reasons:

Unless we all do something, worldwide, there are going to be another 2.4 billion people on the planet by 2050. Having a smaller family - just one or two children instead of three or more - helps to reverse population growth. And by reversing population growth, we'd be taking another green step towards environmental survival for all.

Changing people's attitudes and behaviour has always been a key part of the project of environmental citizenship (cf. Dobson, 2003). While the private sphere has not been a site for citizenship in the past, there is now willingness to bring household consumption and intimate choices about sex and reproduction into the realm of environmental responsibility - in short, to say that these are matters of public concern. While it has not been a central concern, some theorists of environmental citizenship have argued that the number of children people have should be more than a strictly private decision because of its ecological impacts (cf. Barry, 1999). Going further still, the OPT suggests, referring to the work of American legal expert Carter Dillon, that since family size is a matter of public interest (i.e., environmental survival for all!), a voluntary population reduction policy should be incorporated into law (OPT, 2008). These arguments -- when they are directed at citizens who have real choices and when they place the onus on the affluent to reduce both their consumption and their numbers -- seem to insert principles of social and economic justice into the debate. And yet many people remain deeply sceptical.

Avoiding the Population Question

By way of conclusion, it is worth considering why it is that many people would rather avoid the population question altogether. As noted above, it is often because of uncertainty about the science or a belief that there are other, more pressing questions to address. When neo-Malthusians complain about population politics being too 'politically incorrect' to be a topic of public debate they have in mind

two particular kinds of critic who are deeply wary of asking the 'are we too many?' question: feminists and religious groups. Here again is a case of the population question creating strange bedfellows who share common ground for very different reasons. Religious groups, such as Evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics, oppose population control because of their beliefs that artificial contraception is wrong and that humans are told by God to 'go forth and multiply'. It is true that some religious groups, with powerful lobbying machines, have put pressure on governments not to address population issues or to include family planning as part of international development programmes. For example, under the Bush Administration the USA refused to reaffirm their commitment to the International Conference on Population Development (ICPD) Program of Action because of an objection to phrases such as 'reproductive health services' and 'reproductive rights,' which are key concepts of the agreement.

For diametrically opposed reasons, feminists and especially ecofeminists, have always been harsh critics of population politics, even those promoting the 'voluntary and empowering' strategies mentioned above. One might find this confusing because feminists by definition want to improve women's quality of life and advance gender equality everywhere. Yet feminists are deeply uncomfortable with the population question for a number of reasons. One is that women's reproductive freedom is inalienable and non-negotiable. Rightly or wrongly, feminists believe that it is simply not acceptable to question whether there should be 'freedom to breed' because it opens the door to state control of women's bodies (Seager, 2000). Moreover, feminists are suspicious of the tendency of population control advocates to make women the sole objects/targets of population policies. They question why it is that it is always women's fertility that needs to be curbed (when it takes two), why it is women who need to be educated about their bodies (when women have been controlling their fertility for millennia), and why it is women who need access to reproductive technologies (invented, tested and sold by transnational pharmaceutical companies) in order to reduce the number of children they have. Ecofeminists reject both the diagnosis and the cures presented by population control advocates. Seager (1993: 216) sums the position up nicely with the following criticism of the marriage of populationism and environmentalism: 'Women's fertility is implicitly (sometimes explicitly) blamed for the global environmental crisis. Population control is a euphemism

for the control of women'. Clearly the question 'are we too many?' is not on the feminist political agenda, but not for reasons given (or acknowledged) by the OPT.

The underlying assumptions that are made about human reproduction by (overwhelmingly male) neo-Malthusians are exposed by environmental justice and ecofeminist scholars as products of patriarchal capitalism rather than 'objective science'. These critics have accused populationists of failing to take post-colonial and feminist analyses seriously, in spite of the lip-service paid to the empowerment of women and the poor (cf Silliman and King (eds.), 1999). The question 'are we too many?' simply does not leave space for their kind of analyses. Indeed, there is little recognition in the OPT documentation of the complex reasons why women have more than the 'replacement number' of children (i.e. two), reasons which include crippling poverty (often related to and exacerbated by environmental degradation), the sexist preference for sons, male sexual aggression and rape (often supported by militarism), and the fact that the more women are devalued in society, the more their only social capital is the ability to produce the next generation. These are not problems that are unique to the developing world. They are persistent products of patriarchy and capitalism that all the 'education', 'empowerment' or contraceptive technologies in the world will not address. Nor will an ideologically-based fixation on the 'are we too many' question make it possible to create the kind of policies that might lead to more socially just and ecologically sustainable societies. In fact, some view it as an unnecessarily polemical issue that does more harm than good for all concerned. That is why many people would rather not ask it.

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