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Book Review
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Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population

**Matthew Connelly; Cambridge, MA; Belknap Harvard; 2008; xiv + 521 pages;
\$35.00; ISBN 978-0-674-02423-6**

Connelly has taken on a broad and difficult topic, the rise and fall of the world population control movement in the twentieth century. Histories of the various components have been available for quite some time as have sociological and political texts, but this is the first effort to combine the various histories that begin with Malthus and grow by their various often intertwined paths into the mid- and late-century population control movement, an attempt by private organizations to alter societies in the developing world in accordance with one of several competing western European standards.

The work ranges through the twentieth century and addresses nations over the world. But Connelly rightfully argues that the U.S. was the place where most of the policy and financing activity was. It was also with England, the home of immigration restriction, birth control, eugenics in general, environmentalism, and most of the other elements that combined to become the world population control movement. Particularly significant is the funding that American organizations and government provided. And it was American and English demographers who identified, probably erroneously, the population time bomb – Connelly documents how demographers worked with bad data for half a century before the first general censuses of most of the world after World War II and how they read a potentially disastrous growth rate at a time when population growth rates were actually in decline, providing a rationale for the culminating movement, the sterilization programs so aggressively pursued at mid century.

This story also has elements of agricultural policy, environmentalism, and an ongoing Malthusianism. Nationalism and race pride are also factors. Eventually population control through restriction of births became tied into American foreign policy. However dominant, the American story is only part of the whole. Although the Americans and English drove the early eugenics, birth control and demographic organizations and ideas that fed the population control movement, application occurred mostly outside the United States, save for the U.S. states' efforts to sterilize their "misfits." Generally when the focus of the narrative shifts from theory to application it turns from the United States to elsewhere in the world, but inevitably it returns.

The work is surprisingly readable. Although critical of the direction that population control took and of the way that the Catholic Church had undue influence on American governmental policy and policy makers, the author avoids becoming overly partisan in his rhetoric. Having expressed his bias up front as is standard practice in current historical work, even in discussing the eugenics taken to extreme of the Nazi extermination efforts, he remains calm, noting that there was nothing new in the ideas, merely in their execution. Genocide is just another way of managing population, the same as breeding better and bigger families through state fair competitions or banning birth control through papal edict.

The infighting between eugenics and birth control groups is interesting because rather than bogging down in technical disagreements he features the personalities involved. The movement that began as an effort to upgrade the population (and potentially could have involved social and economic improvement including better pre-natal and maternal care as well as more education for women) turned over time into a movement to eliminate excess population, and eventually to eliminate the excess through sterilization, voluntary or coerced. By the 1960s and 1970s the movement was out of control, with American money flowing abundantly with no clear direction or oversight.

Excesses in China's program, modeled on the western one, fired the American Right to Life movement to press Ronald Reagan to end American financing, and the movement receded. More national leaders came to realize that the old eugenics argument had merit – the betterment of humanity lay with education of women, social and economic growth and improvement, and self

determination, not with false science mishandled by one group at the expense of another. Connelly is clear in explaining that the early racism and paternalism of the imperialist age persisted through the development of the population control movement, allowing white Europeans to rationalize their imposition of mandatory sterilization and insufficiently tested birth control technology on the rest of the world.

Connelly's section on the eventual rebellion by the recipients against the misguided concept is well written. Connelly is also on the mark when describing the various technologies and methods. He makes clear exactly how each method works – or doesn't. And he discusses the social and personal costs, the coldness of those administering the programs as well as those administering the treatments. Clearly, there is a loss of humanity in this effort to engineer populations at the expense of people.

Connelly's work should appeal to more than just the specialist. It is accessible to the interested layperson without being superficial in its treatment of technicalities. It covers the debates within the movement, the evolving stances of groups and individuals on what seem to be an ongoing unresolved set of issues as timely in 1970 as in 1870. Connelly makes clear that the issues have lasting pertinence even though their origins lie in what are now dusty dustups of interest only to the specialist.

He uses the secondary sources effectively but his strength is in archives. He lists all of the appropriate state and private repositories. As he notes, he's had good cooperation, which surprised him somewhat because earlier works were light on archival sources. Because he has tapped into previously neglected sources, he is able to provide a more nuanced treatment of even the overworked eugenics and birth control debates.

Fatal Misconception is a well-researched, clearly written explication of how a good idea can go bad when well meaning individuals (with or without less than honorable underlying beliefs) attempt to impose one standard, disputed within their own group, on a diverse collection of groups, some of whom can benefit, others of whom will suffer because of their differing traditions and current needs and practices. This tale should be a caution to others who seek to impose their preferences on an unreceptive world in a one-size-fits-all program.