

# H-Diplo

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### Apocalypse Now!

Being politically correct, influential people in policy making circles in the First World no longer talk of the yellow peril, or use phrases such as population explosion, or metaphors like the population bomb. Nevertheless, neo-Malthusian thinking – that population growth is the cause of a host of problems, of hunger and poverty, or indeed famines, and today, genocide and global warming - frames other policy discourses, those on immigration and the environment being prominent ones. “Most Americans Want Immigration Drastically Reduced” reads a full-page advertisement in *Harper’s*, put forth by Negative Population Growth. It goes on to argue about the “catastrophic effect of overpopulation on our environment, resources and standard of living.”<sup>1</sup> Neo-Malthusian underpinnings are evident in some of the security discourses on refugees. The ghastly Rwandan tragedy was seen by some as an inevitable consequence of population growth, not the politics of genocide.<sup>2</sup> “Hum do hamare do, woh paanch, unke pachees”,<sup>3</sup> was a slogan that won an infamous election in Gujarat after the genocide of Muslims in that state in India in 2002 (Rao 2007).<sup>4</sup> We only need

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<sup>1</sup> Negative Population Growth, “Most Americans Want Immigration Drastically Reduced” (advertisement), *Harper’s Magazine* 309:1853 (October 2004), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> “We are two and have two. They have five and have twenty five”. The “we” here refers to Hindus and “they” to Muslims. This plays on the fact that legally in India a Muslim man can take four wives. The slogan alleges they therefore have twenty five children.

<sup>4</sup> Mohan Rao, “Saffron Demography: So Dangerous, Yet So Appealing”, *Different Takes* No.48 (Spring 2007) (Amherst: The Population and Development Program, Hampshire College), 24.

to remember that as soon as the last elections were announced in France, immigration was raised as an issue.

At the same time, a sub-discipline of “strategic demography” has emerged, that seeks to locate the growth of Islamic “fundamentalism” in the “youth bulge theory”. This fanciful theory argues that population growth in Islamic countries, characterized by a high proportion of youth, leads to the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, spelling political danger, not just to democracy in these countries, but to the so-called free world.<sup>5</sup> This search for biological metaphors for political and economic problems does not, for instance, explain the rise to political prominence of Protestant fundamentalism in the United States, which has of course no youth bulge, nor indeed significant population growth. But such matters of truth or rigour rarely troubled demographic discourses in the past, and obviously do not today. In other words, the population growth argument remains compelling, and truly protean, explaining just about everything, and thus of course explaining nothing.

This important book under review traces the pre-history of environmentalism in the United States: how conservation was transformed into environmentalism and the role neo-Malthusian ideas in shaping this transformation. Tracing this shift, which had profound repercussions touching on millions of lives throughout the world, is a daunting task since it involves a large range of actors and institutions. In this context, the book abjures rhetoric and conspiracy theories, revealing the concatenation of ideas, institutions and the contingencies of global politics in order to, to use current jargon, deconstruct neo-Malthusian assumptions that lie at the heart of dominant environmental policies. The author uses an impressive array of data, both primary and secondary. But what is entirely missing is data from the marginalised, the victims of both populationism and environmentalism.

Robertson identifies a number of international and national factors that together brought population concerns and environmentalism to centre stage. The post-second World War world witnessed a tide of decolonisation that could not be crushed – although not for want of trying. It saw the diminishing of the UK’s imperial power to be replaced by the Cold War struggle between the imperial United States and the Soviet Union. Post-colonial nations attempted, with limited success, but with success nevertheless, to make a break with the historical structures of global inequity that underlay their underdevelopment. As a result of such policies as self-reliant import-substituting growth, there was a reduction in the flow of resources from the countries of the Third World to those of the First. In other words, there was a decline in the rate of exploitation of the former, as they protected themselves from, and attempted to recover from, the ravages of the militarily-imposed globalisation that they had

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[http://popdev.hampshire.edu/sites/popdev/files/uploads/dt/DifferenTakes\\_48.pdf](http://popdev.hampshire.edu/sites/popdev/files/uploads/dt/DifferenTakes_48.pdf) (accessed 20 September 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Anne Hendrixson, “Angry Young Men, Veiled Young Women: Constructing a New Population Threat,” *Cornerhouse Briefing* No.34 (December 2004) (Dorset, UK: The Corner House, 2004). <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/resource/angry-young-men-veiled-young-women> (accessed 20 September 2012).

been victims of for centuries. Control over resources was one key aspect of this post-colonial agenda.

But they were also in thrall with a model of development that the Soviet Union offered: one based on equity and the state-led creation of demand in the population, going beyond what John Maynard Keynes offered, which was to emphasise the role of the state in demand creation within the framework of capitalism. In this Cold-War struggle over spheres of influence, U.S. aid to Third World countries, and technology, in particular Green Revolution technology, was to play a key role. “In the struggle with international communism...the United States could not afford to lose the allies, strategic ground and resources of the third world....Overpopulation in these places, it was believed, created poverty and poverty created communism” (86). Thus emerged the strategic concerns that were to shape the United States’ policies towards global population over the coming decades.

India was at the heart of such concerns -- “a top Cold War prize” (98). With population growth and a declining death rate – which the Cold War demographer Kingsley Davis <sup>6</sup> attributed to public health measures with utterly no data to cite – famine and apocalypse loomed large. Thus as the U.S. rushed in food aid, it also profoundly shaped and guided population policy in India with help from the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation. Some economists developed models describing a ‘low-level equilibrium trap’ in which population growth precluded growth of per capita income. Ansley Coale and Edgar Hoover quantified the economics costs of continued high fertility and found it to be considerable.<sup>7</sup> Demographers such as Kingsley Davis and Philip Hauser<sup>8</sup> drew attention to the race between India and communist China, the outcome of which was thought to be of great importance to the free world. India was perceived as the last bastion of freedom, that was to be guarded against the communist onslaught in the pack of falling dominoes. The World Bank was also keenly interested in India’s population control policy.

There were changes within the United States as well, that Robertson so ably shows us. The post-War baby boom seemed to indicate that population growth was not an issue for Third World economies alone. Indeed population growth, along with increasing incomes, and immigration could well lead to the “Chinification of America” (105). Growing urbanisation, the increasing migration of blacks to cities, along with the whites fleeing to suburbs, led to calls for improving the quality of life even as numbers, the ‘quantity of life,’ needed drastic control. In the tumultuous sixties – with urban riots and race riots on the landscape, growing opposition to the Vietnam war, and an increasingly assertive feminist movement demanding control over women’s bodies (access to contraceptives being central to this)-- it seemed as if

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<sup>6</sup> Davis, Kingsley, “The Amazing Decline of Mortality in Underdeveloped Areas”, *American Economic Review* 46:2 (1956), 314.

<sup>7</sup> Ansley J. Coale and Edgar, M Hoover, *Population Growth and Economic Development in Low Income Countries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958).

<sup>8</sup> Philp M.Hauser, “The Study of Population” in Philip M.Hauser and Otis Dudley Duncan (Eds), *What is Demography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

population growth was taking an apocalyptic toll in the USA as well. This apparently threatened the sustainability of the American way of life, and indeed the pristine landscape of the vast country.

It was in this situation that one of the most influential “environmental Malthusians”, as Robertson calls the breed, arrived on the scene. This was Paul Ehrlich, and his influential 1968 book was *The Population Bomb*<sup>9</sup> – the title derived from an earlier pamphlet by Hugh Moore, an influential and rich neo-Malthusian. Ehrlich, a biologist, further developed the ideas of biologist William Vogt in *Road to Survival*<sup>10</sup>. Vogt had influentially fleshed out the concept of “carrying capacity” of the earth. Vogt also believed that Chinese were “ignorant backward people” and Indians bred “with the irresponsibility of codfish” (53). Clearly, then, racism was shaping some of these environmental and populationist ideas. What is also interesting is that all these biologists were studying instinctive creatures and generalising their findings to human populations.

Ehrlich, unlike his Guru Vogt, was not racist. He also started the national network of campaign organisations called Zero Population Growth. Charismatic and indefatigable, he played a remarkable role in shaping attitudes towards population growth. He was masterful at language and in evoking fears of population growth. He had able support from the biologist Garrett Hardin whose 1968 publication *The Tragedy of the Commons*.<sup>11</sup> is described by the author as “the Magna Carta of compulsory population control” (153). Ehrlich too supported policies of forced sterilisation in India.

The surge of new-Malthusian ideas were to diminish somewhat in the late 1970s but the damage had been done. In the process a pattern of domination was established, along with a global network of institutions that continue to be effective in areas as diverse as HIV/AIDS policy and indeed reproductive health policy. School text books in India still reflect the ideas of Ehrlich and Harding and most elites in the Third World believe that all problems in their countries stem from population growth.<sup>12</sup> Ehrlich himself modified his position, emphasising consumption instead of numbers. Indeed, he started to call for “controlling the overpopulation of the affluent” (180) but this of course fell on deaf ears.

I have some problems with this extremely readable book. First, that the author gives far more space to the environmental Malthusians than to their critiques, while maintaining an objective distance himself. This too is hardly an apolitical position, if that is even desirable or possible. Second, he does not discuss feminist environmentalism or indeed any kind of

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<sup>9</sup> Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968).

<sup>10</sup> William Vogt, *Road to Survival* (New York: W. Sloane Associates, 1948).

<sup>11</sup> Garrett Hardin, *The Tragedy of the Commons* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

<sup>12</sup> Mohan Rao, *From Population Control to Reproductive Health: Malthusian Arithmetic* (New Delhi: Sage, 2004).

environmentalism critical of Malthusian environmentalism. Third, the author believes that Keynes “invented the field of ‘macro’ economics” (34) and quotes a number of people who blame these Keynesian policies for environmental problems and over-consumption. I think, on the contrary, unbridled free-market-led consumption causes more damage both to the environment and people’s health. And finally, the population of the Third World does not solely exist as victims. Nevertheless this book is important reading in a large range of areas: environmental studies, demography, geography, gender studies and public health.

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