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Population Panic

The obsession with the birthrates of the poor has a grim history, and is used by the rich to transfer blame.

When a major study[1] was published last month, showing that the global population is likely to peak then crash much sooner than most scientists had assumed, I naïvely imagined that people in rich nations would at last stop blaming all the world's environmental problems on population growth. I was wrong. If anything, it appears to have got worse.

Next week the BirthStrike movement[2] – founded by women who, by announcing their decision not to have children, seek to focus our minds on the horror of environmental collapse – will dissolve itself[3], as its cause has been hijacked so virulently and persistently by population obsessives. The founders explain that they had "underestimated the power of 'overpopulation' as a growing form of climate breakdown denial".

It is true that, in some parts of the world, population growth is a major driver of particular kinds of ecological damage, such as the expansion of small-scale agriculture into rainforests, the bushmeat trade and local pressure on water and land for housing. But its global impact is much smaller than many people claim.

The formula for calculating people's environmental footprint is simple, but widely misunderstood:

➠ Impact = Population x Affluence x Technology (I = PAT).

The global rate of consumption growth, before the pandemic, was 3% a year. Population growth is 1%. Some people assume this means that the rise in population bears one third of the responsibility for increased consumption.

But population growth is overwhelmingly concentrated among the world's poorest people[4], who have scarcely any A or T[5] to multiply their P. The extra resource use and greenhouse gas emissions caused by a rising human population are a tiny fraction[6] of the impact of consumption growth.

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[1] https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30677-2/fulltext

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/mar/12/birthstrikers-meet-the-women-who-refuse-to-have-children-until-climate-change-ends

[3] https://www.birthstrikeforfuture.com/

[4] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0956247809344361

[5] https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/file_attachments/mb-extreme-carbon-inequality-021215-en.pdf

[6] https://ourworldindata.org/co2-by-income-region

Yet it is widely used as a blanket explanation of environmental breakdown. Panic about population growth enables the people most responsible for the impacts of rising consumption (the affluent) to blame those who are least responsible.

At this year's *World Economic Forum* in Davos, the primatologist Dame Jane Goodall, who is a patron of the charity *Population Matters*[7], told the assembled pollutocrats[8], some of whom have ecological footprints thousands of times greater than the global average,

> "All these things we talk about wouldn't be a problem if there was the size of population that there was 500 years ago."

I doubt that any of those who nodded and clapped were thinking,

> "yes, I urgently need to disappear."

In 2019, she appeared in an advertisement for *British Airways*[9], whose customers produce more greenhouse gas emissions on one flight than many of the world's people generate in a year[10]. If we had the global population of 500 years ago (around 500 million), and if it were composed of average UK plane passengers[11], our environmental impact would probably be greater than[12] that of the 7.8 billion alive today.

She proposed no mechanism by which her dream might come true. This could be the attraction. The very impotence of her call is reassuring to those who don't want change. If the answer to environmental crisis is to wish other people away, we might as well give up and carry on consuming.

The excessive emphasis on population growth has a grim history. Since the clergymen Joseph Townsend[13] and Thomas Malthus[14] wrote their tracts in the 18th Century, poverty and hunger have been blamed not on starvation wages, war, misrule and wealth extraction by the rich, but on the reproduction rates of the poor. Winston Churchill blamed the Bengal Famine of 1943, that he helped to cause through the mass export of India's rice, on the Indians *"breeding like rabbits"*[15]. In 2013 Sir David Attenborough, also a patron of Population Matters, wrongly blamed[16] famines in Ethiopia on *"too many people for too little land"*, and suggested that sending food aid was counter-productive.

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[7] https://populationmatters.org/our-patrons

[8] https://twitter.com/tomselliott/status/1220696092532187136

[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2w2bCMhc9k

[10] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2019/jul/19/carbon-calculator-how-taking-one-flight-emits-as-much-as-many-people-do-in-a-year

[11] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/25/1-of-english-residents-take-one-fifth-of-overseas-flights-survey-shows

[12] https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/file_attachments/mb-extreme-carbon-inequality-021215-en.pdf

[13] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Townsend

[14] www.esp.org/books/malthus/population/malthus.pdf

[15] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/29/winston-churchill-policies-contributed-to-1943-bengal-famine-study

[16] https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/sep/18/david-attenborough-famine-population

Another of the charity's patrons, Paul Ehrlich, whose incorrect predictions about mass famine helped to provoke the current population panic, once argued[17] that the US should "coerce" India into "sterilising all Indian males with three or more children", by making food aid conditional on this policy. This proposal was similar to the brutal programme that Indira Gandhi later introduced, with financial support from the UN and the World Bank.

Foreign aid from the UK was funding crude and dangerous sterilisation[18] in India as recently as 2011, on the grounds that this policy was helping to "fight climate change". Some of the victims of this programme allege that they were forced to participate. At the same time, the UK government was pouring billions of pounds of aid[19] into developing coal, gas and oil plants, in India and other nations. It blamed the poor for the crisis it was helping to cause.

Malthusiasm slides easily into racism[20]. The great majority of the world's population growth is happening in the poorest countries[21], where most people are black or brown. The colonial powers justified their atrocities by fomenting a moral panic about "barbaric", "degenerate" people "outbreeding" the "superior races".

These claims have been revived today by the far right, promoting conspiracy theories about "white replacement"[22] and "white genocide"[23]. When affluent white people wrongly transfer blame for their environmental impacts to the birthrate of much poorer brown and black people, their finger-pointing reinforces these narratives. It is inherently racist[24].

The far right now uses the population argument[25] to contest immigration into the US and the UK. This too has a grisly heritage: the pioneering conservationist Madison Grant promoted, alongside his environmental work, the idea[26] that the "Nordic master race" was being "overtaken" in the US by "worthless race types." As president of the Immigration Restriction League, he helped to engineer the vicious 1924 Immigration Act.

But, as there are some genuine ecological impacts of population growth, how do we distinguish proportionate concerns about these harms from deflection and racism?

Well, we know that the strongest determinant of falling birth rates is female emancipation and education[27].

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[17] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/aug/27/immigration-panic-how-the-west-fell-for-manufactured-rage

[18] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/15/uk-aid-forced-sterilisation-india

[19] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/aug/11/britain-spent-twice-as-much-on-overseas-fossil-fuels-as-renewables

[20] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1553858

[21] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population_growth_rate

[22] https://www.monbiot.com/2020/08/31/population-panic/[https://www.gq.com/story/white-replacement-conspiracy-theory

[23] https://www.rawstory.com/2018/08/donald-trumps-white-genocide-rhetoric-dangerous-escalation-racism/

[24] https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/blog/2019/mar/9/how-racist-myths-built-population-growth-bogey-man

[25] https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/environment-climate-eugenics-immigration/

[26] https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2009/authors-probe-roots-us-far-right

[27] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0304387807000855

The major obstacle to female empowerment is extreme poverty, whose effect is felt disproportionately by women.

So a good way of deciding whether someone's population concerns are genuine is to look at their record of campaigning against structural poverty.

Have they contested the impossible debts poor nations are required to pay?

Have they argued against corporate tax avoidance, or extractive industries that drain wealth from poorer countries, leaving almost nothing behind, or our own financial sector's processing of money stolen abroad[28]?

Or have they simply sat and watched as people remain locked in poverty, then complained about their fertility?

Before long, this reproductive panic will disappear. Nations will soon be fighting over immigrants: not to exclude them, but to attract them, as the demographic transition[29] leaves their ageing populations with a shrinking tax base and a dearth of key workers.

Until then, we should resist attempts by the rich to demonise the poor.

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[28] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/05/how-britain-can-help-you-get-away-with-stealing-millions-a-five-step-guide

[29] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-53409521