

Climate change and “overpopulation”: Some reflections

By The Corner House
4 December 2009

The burning of fossil fuels to drive a century and a half of Northern industrialisation is by far the major contributor to human-caused climate change. Once dug, mined and taken out of the ground and burned, coal, oil and gas add to the amount of carbon cycling between the atmosphere and the oceans, soil, rock and vegetation.

On human time scales, this transfer is irrevocable and unsustainable. There is simply not enough “space” in above-ground biological and geological systems to park safely the huge mass of carbon coming out of the ground without carbon dioxide building up catastrophically in both the air and the oceans. The earth and its ecosystems have their limits.

At the most fundamental level, therefore, the climate solution requires turning away from fossil fuel dependence. Societies locked in to fossil fuels need to adopt structurally different, non-fossil energy, transport, agricultural and consumption regimes within a few decades to minimise future dangers and costs. Infrastructure, trade, even community structure, will have to be reorganised. State support will have to be shifted from fossil-fuelled development toward popular movements that are already constructing or defending low-carbon means of livelihood and social life.

Solutions to the climate crisis thus depend first and foremost on political organising and on social and economic changes.

It is not surprising, however, that a worsening climate situation is often attributed not to continued fossil fuel extraction but to too many people. Whenever global environmental crises, Third World poverty or world hunger are at issue, whenever conflict, migration or economic growth are discussed, economists, demographers, planners, corporate financiers and political pundits (at least in the North) frequently invoke overpopulation.

Over 200 years ago, at a time of immense social, political and economic upheavals and deprivation in England triggered by the enclosure of common lands and forests on which peasant livelihoods depended, free market economist Thomas Malthus wrote a story about how nature and humans interact. The punch line was his mathematical analogy for the disparity between human and food increases. Harnessing politics to mathematics, he provided a spuriously neutral set of arguments for promoting a new political correctness – one that denied the shared rights of everyone to subsistence, sanctioning instead the rights of the “deserving” over the “undeserving”, with the market as arbiter of entitlements. The poor were poor because they lacked restraint and discipline, not because of privatisation. This is the essence of the overpopulation argument.

Today, a range of industries use the same argument to colonise the future for their particular interests and to privatise commonally-held goods. In agriculture, for instance, the talk is of extra mouths in the South causing global famine – unless biotechnology companies have the right to patent and genetically-engineer seeds. With respect to water, growing numbers of thirsty slum dwellers are held to threaten water wars – unless water resources are handed over to private sector water companies. And in climate, the talk is of teeming Chinese and Indians causing whole cities to be lost to flooding through their greenhouse gas emissions – unless polluting companies are granted property rights in the atmosphere through carbon-trading schemes and carbon offsets. These are the tools of the main official approach to the climate crisis that aims to build a global carbon market worth trillions of dollars.

Two centuries ago, Malthus was compelled to admit that his mathematical and geometric series of increases in food and humans were not observable in any society. He acknowledged that his “power of number” was just an image – an admission demographers have since confirmed. And for over 200 years, his theory and arguments – that it is the number of people that cause resource scarcity – have been refuted endlessly by demonstrations that any problem attributed to human numbers can more convincingly be explained by social inequality, or that the statistical correlation is ambiguous. Malthus’s greatest achievement was in fact to obscure the roots of poverty, inequality and environmental deterioration. The “war-room” mentality generated by predictions of scarcity-driven apocalypse has always diverted attention away from the awkward social and environmental history of discredited policies and projects – a more important focus of study.

Frequently left out of discussions about tackling malnutrition, hunger, starvation and famine, for instance, are the maldistribution of the world’s food supplies, skewed access to land, trade policies, the hazards of devoting land to agrofuel or carbon offset production, unequal access to money to buy food, and commodity speculation.

If over one billion people do not have access to safe drinking water, it is because water, like food, flows to those with the most bargaining power: industry and bigger farmers first, richer consumers second, and the poor last, whose water is polluted by industrial effluent, exported in foodstuffs or poured down the drain through others’ wasteful consumption.

Studies have highlighted the contradictions in trying to correlate population growth with carbon emissions, both historical and predicted.¹ They describe how industrialized countries, with only 20 per cent of the world’s population, are responsible for 80 per cent of the accumulated carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. They indicate that the countries with the highest greenhouse gas emissions are those with slow or declining population growth. The few countries in the world where women’s fertility rates remain high have the lowest per capita carbon emissions.

Aggregate per capita emissions figures, however, still tend to obscure just who is producing greenhouse gases and how by statistically levelling out emissions among everyone. One estimate is that it is the world’s richest half-billion people, some 7 per cent of the global population, who are responsible for half the world’s carbon dioxide emissions, while conversely the poorest 50 per cent are responsible for 7 per cent of emissions.

Population numbers, in sum, offer no useful pointers toward policies that should be adopted to tackle climate change. Massive fossil fuel use in industrialized societies cannot be countered by handing out condoms. Nor will reducing the number of births dent the massive annual subsidies, estimated at over \$100 billion, that oil companies receive in tax breaks, giving them an unfair advantage over low-carbon alternatives. Carbon trading continues to give incentives to polluting industries to delay structural change and to continue extracting fossil fuels. Carbon offsets wind up increasing fossil fuel emissions rather than compensating for them and reinforcing fossil fuel dependence. In the process, land, water and air on which Southern communities depend continue to be usurped.

But facts, figures and alternative explanations, while necessary, have never had much effect on population debates or disagreements over policies. This is because, deep down, the

¹ “Lighten the footprint, but keep the feet”, *The Economist*, 10 September 2007; David Satterthwaite, “The implications of population growth and urbanization for climate change”, *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol 21 (2), October 2009, pp.545-567; Fred Pearce, “Consumption Dwarfs Population as Main Environmental Threat”, *environment 360*, 13 April 2009, <http://e360.yale.edu/content/feature.msp?id=2140>.

disagreements and debates are less about numbers than about ideology, values, power and economic interests than about rights, markets and welfare. They are political and cultural disagreements, not mathematical ones. Overpopulation arguments and the policies based on them persist not because of any intrinsic merit, but because of the ideological advantages they offer to powerful political and economic interests to minimise redistribution, to restrict social rights, and to advance and legitimise their goals.

Those who raise the spectre of future human numbers draw attention to facts that most critics readily acknowledge as well – the earth cannot support trillions of human bodies; humans do often threaten their own environments. In doing so, however, they invite us to leave aside detailed, context-specific social analysis and return to the romance of the mathematics classroom where abstract, inexorable, monolithic tensions between “humans” and “nature” are played out in graphs on computer screens. They also invariably tend to construe a query about an overpopulation argument or an alternative explanation for a catastrophe as an assertion of a patent falsehood, particularly that there are no limits to the growth of human numbers or indeed any other kind of growth.

In climate change debates, overpopulation arguments serve to delay making structural changes in North and South away from the extraction and use of fossil fuels; to explain the failure of carbon markets to tackle the problem; to justify increased and multiple interventions in the countries deemed to hold the surplus people; and to excuse those interventions when they cause further environmental degradation, migration or conflict.

As such, population theory is far more than a theory or a principle. It is above all a political strategy that obscures the relationships of power between different groups in societies, whether these be local, national, global, while at the same time justifying those political relationships that allow certain groups to dominate others structurally, be they men over women, property owners over commoners, or ‘us’ over ‘them’. The “too many” are hardly ever the speakers, they are always the Other.

This partially explains why those considered to be surplus are not those who profit from continued fossil fuel extraction but those most harmed by it and by climate change. From Malthus’s time onwards, the implied ‘over’ in ‘overpopulation’ has invariably been poorer people or darker skinned ones or people from the colonies and countries of the South – or a combination of all three. Other categories are increasingly added to the list of overpopulation “targets”: the elderly, the disabled, immigrants, and those needing welfare.

From its earliest days, moreover, demography has espoused the belief that “females create population problems”. Unlike almost all other development, economic, environment or social policies devised by think tanks, implemented by governments and funded by multilateral agencies, population policies focus on women from the outset rather than tacking them on later – or rather focus solely on the number of children to whom women give birth.

But if the human population was halved, quartered, decimated even, so long as one person has the power to deny food, water, shelter, land, livelihood, energy and life to another, even two people may be judged “too many”.

Further reading on climate: <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/subject/climate/>

Further reading on ‘population’: <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/subject/overpopulation/>