

**“Managing Resources, Managing People:
The Political Uses of Population”**

presentation by
Sarah Sexton and Nicholas Hildyard,
The Corner House

9 May 2005

at University of Surrey, Guildford, UK
Environmental Management for Developing Countries MSc Module

The theory of population is most often associated with its originator, Thomas Malthus, a 19th century clergyman of the Church of England. When he was writing the first edition of his “Essay on the Principle of Population”, which came out in 1798, Malthus was a curate at a tiny, isolated chapel in an out-of-the way corner of rural Surrey, now known as . . . Guildford.¹ He stayed with his parents just a few miles south-east of where we are today. These years gave him some experience with “the labouring poor” that are the focus of his writings.

Malthus’s writings cleverly assume and maintain from the outset various inequalities not only between rich and poor, but also between women and men. For instance, he writes that individual men (not society or others) should be solely responsible for the upkeep of their children, because women could not be expected to “have resources sufficient to support their own children” and because men are the property owners. This, in turn, would mean that men would have to know who *their* children were: biology usually means that women usually know which children are theirs but men can never be quite sure.²

A contemporary of Malthus who was also exploring changing relationships between women and men, particularly as far as love, marriage and property was concerned, was the novelist, Jane Austen. (She was a “neighbour”, too, living just 20 miles south-west of Guildford in Alton.) The opening sentence of Austen’s novel, *Pride and*

¹ Malthus stayed with his parents during the time at Albury, which is a few miles south-east of Guildford. Okewood chapel where he had his actual job at the time would have been about a half-day’s horse-ride further south of that.

Prejudice, finally published in 1813 but written about the same time as Malthus's first *Essay*, is perhaps the best known of her work:

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”

Both these writers, Malthus and Austen, were synthesising, assimilating and responding in their writings to “radical” currents of thought washing over England at the time. Both were reworking understandings of gender and gender's relationship to the state, discipline, marriage and livelihood. Don't forget that Malthus worked for much of his adult life not in an isolated Surrey chapel but as the chair of political economy at the East India Company's college, and many of his theories were first put to the test in India.³

Today, however, we're not going to compare and contrast their works – this *is* an environmental management course, not an English Literature one – but simply to adapt Jane Austen to Thomas Malthus, or perhaps Malthus to Austen, to claim that:

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single theory in possession of a good political utility, will never be in want of a home.”

The principal tenet of Malthus's theory is that, because the number of people doubles every 25 years (unless checked), thus growing at a geometric rate (1, 2, 4, 8, 16) while food production increases at just an arithmetic rate (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6), “population” – the number of people – will always outstrip food supply. In shorthand, however, the theory is usually taken to mean simply: “too many people”.

But who is “too many”?

For Malthus, the “too many” were the labouring poor. But over the past 200 years, different groups have used his theory at different moments to serve different purposes – and as the theory has thus found its different homes, so the “too many” have been different as well.

² Lohmann, L., *Re-Imagining the Population Debate*, Corner House Briefing Paper 28, March 2003, <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/briefing/index.shtml>

³ See Davis, M., *The Origins of the Third World: Markets, States and Climate*, Corner House Briefing Paper 27, December 2002, <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/briefing/index.shtml>

They have ranged from the labouring poor of the 19th century; to the “feeble-minded” that were eugenicists’ targets in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; to immigrants coming into the United States and the UK; to Third World people cutting down forests, becoming communist, demanding land reform, wanting food, creating conflicts, asking for clean water; and to one of its most recent homes, too many old people needing pensions and health care.

These “too many” are usually not the speaker, they’re not me, they’re usually Others. “Too many” of Them is usually tied to “not enough” of mine, of me feeling *outnumbered*.

“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.”⁴

In all its homes, however, the theory consistently serves:

- to obscure the real roots of poverty, immigration, landlessness, environmental degradation, water scarcity, hunger, war, welfare and wage inequalities, or whatever;
- to prevent change that is more socially and economically just; and
- to appear neutral (not partisan or biased), objective, rational (certainly not emotional), natural and thus inevitable.

Thus to return to my Jane Austen adaptation, the theory of population would seem not to have a good political utility, but an excellent one. We’re going to run quickly through some of the uses that the theory has been put to⁵ and then conclude with their relevance to environmental management.

⁴ Hacking, I., *The Taming of Chance*, 1990.

⁵ For more information, see Ross, E.B., *The Malthus Factor: Poverty, Politics and Population in Capitalist Development*, Corner House Briefing Paper 20, July 2000.

Too many labouring poor

The aims of Thomas Malthus in drawing up his theory were several. Although he was convinced that “the root cause of pauperism was the excessive procreation of the lower classes” – if you’re poor, it’s because you are too many – one aim was not in fact to reduce population pressures but to reduce the obligation of the rich to alleviate human misery. By suggesting that the fertility of the poor – rather than chronic or periodic unemployment, the fencing of common lands, or high food prices – was the main source of their poverty and by implying that the poor's fertility could not be significantly influenced by human intervention, Malthus acquitted those who did have land, factories, and the like, and indeed the whole political economic and social system, of any accountability for poverty. His main political agenda was to defend the growing system of private property and to attack common property regimes.⁶

Too many mentally-retarded

Malthus contended that one of the reasons the poor had “too many” children was that they lacked the middle-class virtues of “moral restraint”, such as prudence, foresight, self-discipline and the capacity to manage their affairs in a rational manner.

In the second half of the 19th century, eugenics took this thinking a step further by arguing that the moral deficiencies of the “too many poor” were innate. Their excessive fertility was thus causing national "racial stocks" to deteriorate. By the turn of the 20th century, the category of “feeble-minded” had been expanded not just to the ill and the disabled, but to others who constituted a wide variety of social problems: prostitutes, vagrants and petty criminals. One solution? Sterilisation. Where The Corner House is based, Dorset, another solution was “transportation” to Australia.

⁶ Lohmann, L., *Re-Imagining the Population Debate*, Corner House Briefing Paper 28, March 2003, <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/briefing/index.shtml>

Too many of the Third World

After the Second World War, the “too many” had become those in the Third World, the developing countries – and this is the “too many” that most people think of when the word “overpopulation”, or even simply “population”, is mentioned.

For the past 50 years and more, Western-educated or -influenced elites, governments, institutions and aid agencies have variously attributed a range of major social problems – poverty, environmental degradation, slow economic growth, hunger, war and conflict, threats to Northern security, unemployment or international migration – to the increasing number of people in the world, particularly those who are poorer, darker-skinned, and from the countries of the South.

Around this time, also, the cause of this “too many” became more clearly defined as not just people’s fertility but women’s fertility, women having too many babies. Whereas population was culturally defined in Malthus’s day as poor commoners, today it is black women. The cover of almost any book or magazine on “population” would not be able to communicate its topic visually if it used photographs of white, middle-class, office-worker men. Instead, they invariably feature women and children of colour.

The main route employed to reducing population growth has been to try to reduce the number of babies to whom women give birth. Of all the development, economic, environment or social policies devised by think tanks, implemented by governments and funded by multilateral agencies, population policies tend to be the only ones that primarily focus on women from the outset rather than subsequently tacking on gender-oriented amendments under pressure from women’s movements.⁷

For instance, in 1992, in response to a question about this focus on women, gynaecologist Dr Hugh Gorwill said:

⁷ Nair, S., Kirbat, P. and Sexton, S., *A Decade After Cairo: Women’s Health in a Free Market Economy*, Corner House Briefing Paper 31, June 2004, <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/briefing/index.shtml>

“We know more about what makes females work than what makes males work. That's only because females create population problems . . . The common pathway to turn off having people is females.”⁸

Not women, but females.

This may seem obvious, a law of nature, so obvious that it can't be questioned or doubted. Here, however, we rely on the wisdom of a three-year-old girl that Sarah knows when she was asking the question that many young children ask: “where do babies come from?” In response, the adults didn't mention storks or baskets in rivers, but followed the liberal, truthful route of “from mummy's tummy” – only to be met with another question: “Yes, but how do they get there?”

The primary means to “turn off having people” – it might be more effective simply to turn people off each other – continue to be sterilisation and contraception, although employment and literacy are also much talked about, and since the AIDS crisis, condoms get more of a look-in, although for different reasons.

For some interests, however, the “too many” people in the Third World don't present a problem or a worry or a threat that needs to be tackled: they simply serve as a justification to pursue a certain course of action.

Agriculture is one example. One argument for Green Revolution agriculture – crops that require high chemical or water inputs to give higher yields – was that it would feed all these mouths – including the mouths that had been displaced off their lands in order for the new crops to be grown. The argument continues today for genetically modified crops: they are held by certain interest groups to be the only way to feed the proverbial five thousand and more.⁹

⁸ quoted in Burfoot, A., “An interview with Dr Hugh Gorwill: Potential risks to women exposed to clomiphene citrate”, *Issues in Reproductive and Genetic Engineering*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1992.

⁹ See Hildyard, N., “‘Scarcity’ as Political Strategy: Colonising the Future – Reflections on Three Hanging Children”, presentation at CONFERENCE TITLE, June 2005.

Too many old people

Where has the theory of population found its home, or homes, today?

When the topic of “population” is mentioned, we’ve often heard several commentators say, “Oh, all those problems were solved at Cairo or in Beijing”. For those not in the loop, “Cairo” refers to the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development held in Egypt and “Beijing” to the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in China. The Programme of Action that came out of the Cairo population conference was the first and most comprehensive international policy document to promote the concepts of reproductive rights and reproductive health, largely as a result of the concerted organising and lobbying of women’s groups who teamed up with population groups.¹⁰

The Programme’s recommendation – that population programmes provide reproductive health services rather than just family planning – assumes that women’s fertility will not drop until children survive beyond infancy and young childhood, until men also take responsibility for contraception, and until women have the right to control their fertility and enough political power to secure that right.

British sociologist Frank Furedi contends that promoting population policies through the rhetoric of women’s health has become central to “the marketing of fertility control”, and that such medicalisation of population issues “is seldom contested, because it appears to be entirely about the non-controversial subject of health”. As a result, the “underlying agenda of fertility control becomes inconspicuous to the designated target audience”.¹¹

But if in recent years, the problem of the overpopulated Third World is less in the media headlines because it’s been “solved by Cairo”, if it’s no longer women making these “bombs” that will “explode”, “flood” or “swarm” throughout the world – the classic environmental treatises on population are by biologist Paul Ehrlich, his 1968 volume, *The Population Bomb*, and then his 1989 book, *The Population Explosion* – then it’s now older people, or rather older women because women tend to live longer

¹⁰ Nair, S., Kirbat, P. and Sexton, S., *A Decade After Cairo: Women’s Health in a Free Market Economy*, Corner House Briefing Paper 31, June 2004, <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/briefing/index.shtml>

¹¹ Furedi, F., *Population and Development: A Critical Introduction*, Polity Press, Oxford, 1995, p.139.

than men. (In the context of bombs, however, for those of you who thought we were going to say “too many Muslims”, population theory has also found a home in the current “war on terror”, too.¹²)

These too many old people are no longer primarily “over there” in the Third World. They have come home to Malthus’s country. In Britain today, newspaper and magazine articles repeatedly talk about “the pensions time-bomb”, the “old age health care explosion”, and so forth. And if population theory has found a home, then the proponents of cutting public provision of pensions and health care for older people have found a ready-made language and set of arguments – just as Malthus wanted to cut welfare for poorer people who no longer had access to common lands.

The essential argument (with variations) goes that there will be (soon) too many older people for the state to afford to pay them a pension or to provide health care for them at the end of their lives. The solution: everyone must save the money for themselves, preferably by putting some money into an individual private pension plan run by a financial institution that will invest around the world for the best economic returns.¹³

As to health care, the state will put money into researching treatments and cures for the diseases of old age such as cancer, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s – and then pharmaceutical companies will sell these patented products to the old people who can afford them – while at the same time the state takes money away from the health and social care needed for today’s people with these conditions.

There isn’t time, and this is probably not the place either, to go into why financial institutions desperately need more money to gamble with, or why pharmaceutical companies desperately need more patented drugs, so we’ll just paraphrase and appropriate from Jane Austen again:

“It is a truth rarely acknowledged, that a private pension plan in possession of no fortune at all, must be in want of a *future* pensioner.”

¹² See Hendrixson, A., *Angry Young Men, Veiled Young Women: Constructing a New Population Threat*, Corner House Briefing Paper 34, December 2004, <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/briefing/index.shtml>

¹³ See Minns, R., *Too Many Raging Grannies: Private Pensions, Corporate Welfare and Expanding Insecurity*, Corner House Briefing 35, forthcoming 2006.

Not a current pensioner, because that involves paying *out* money, whereas a future pensioner, tomorrow's pensioner, pays *in* money. And this prospective pensioner has to be reasonably wealthy, too, otherwise they won't have enough spare money to save into a pension plan.

The corollary of "too many old people" is, of course, not enough young people. Birth rates around the world have been dropping for some years now, in some countries, such as Italy, Japan and Russia, faster than others. The application of population theory to women has obviously worked *too* well in some places.

Not enough young people means not enough workers, and so the actuarial pensions world collides with debates about whether to allow in more immigrants or whether there are "too many" already. If you've been in Britain over the past few weeks, you should be familiar with these arguments by now. Once again, however, the arguments are not really about whether too many people are coming to Britain to work: they're about too many people who aren't like us coming here; too many of them, not enough of "Our" young people and too many of "Other" young people.¹⁴ In many cases, these arguments serve to scapegoat *all* non-white people in this country and to obscure very real insecurities triggered by, for instance, job losses and changing ways of life. Many of these insecurities have been caused by the processes of economic globalisation:¹⁵ money moving around the world with ease to where costs are supposedly lowest and profits supposedly highest – the money from the private pension plans, for instance.

In fact, fears of too many migrants have long provided a home for population, ever since Malthus himself described "clouds of Barbarians" from the northern hemisphere, or 19th century British writers popularised the term "yellow peril" to describe the estimated 37 million labourers who went abroad not only from China, but also from India, Malaya and Java in the 19th and early 20th centuries to work in the various enclaves of the British empire – and thereby to subsidise the British economy.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Hendrixson, A., *Angry Young Men, Veiled Young Women: Constructing a New Population Threat*, Corner House Briefing Paper 34, December 2004, <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/briefing/index.shtml>

¹⁵ Younge, G., "Detox our racist culture: Our standard of living now depends on cheap foreign labour", *The Guardian*, 16 May 2005.

¹⁶ See Davis, M., *The Origins of the Third World: Markets, States and Climate*, Corner House Briefing Paper 27, December 2002, <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/briefing/index.shtml>

Although we disagree with some of his other arguments, therefore, we find it hard not to concur with a conclusion of sociologist Frank Furedi about “the numbers game” that is population theory:

“The ability of the ideology of population control routinely to shed one explanation in favour of another suggests that its apprehensions are independent of actual population trends.”¹⁷

Environmental management

So, what has all this to do with resource management or environmental management?

Everything. The reason we say this, even though we’ve hardly mentioned forests, or land, or water or food, is that population theory is far more than being simply a theory or a principle, as Malthus called it. It is above all a political strategy, a strategy that both obscures the relationships of power between different groups in societies, whether these be local, national, global, that are ultimately responsible for poverty, and at the same time “justifies” those political relationships that allow certain groups in society to dominate others structurally, be it men over women, property owners over commoners, “us” over “them”.

And it is these relationships of power that are critical to the use of “resources”. They determine how *people* are managed and in whose interests. They lie at the roots of a scarcity – not enough food or land or water or forests or jobs or homes – that results from how societies organise themselves rather than from any absolute lack of resources – no food anywhere at all.

To emphasise this socially-generated scarcity – not enough necessities for some people – is not to deny absolute scarcity – insufficient resources, no matter how equitably they are distributed among everyone. We do live on a finite planet. There

¹⁷ Furedi, F., *Population and Development: A Critical Introduction*, Polity Press, Oxford, 1995, p.28.

are limits to the ability of the earth to accommodate pollution, resource depletion, us – people – and so on.

But it is to insist that any discussion of resources and resource management is grounded in an understanding of the workings and relationships of power. For as long as one person has the power to deny resources to another – food, water, land, or a home – even two people may be judged “too many”.¹⁸

So when “population” is mentioned as an explanation of social ills – from poverty to resource depletion – we have found it useful to ask some questions before getting into the discussion:

-- Who is raising the population issue? What is their political past?

-- Are there other explanations for the particular social ill ? Does focusing on population obscure them, and if so, how?

-- What relationships of power are *not* being mentioned when the “too many” labouring poor, feeble-minded, immigrants, people from the Third World, and old people come under the spotlight?

¹⁸ Hildyard, N., “ ‘Scarcity’ as Political Strategy: Colonising the Future – Reflections on Three Hanging Children”, presentation at CONFERENCE TITLE, June 2005.