

Climate change and the overpopulation argument

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The idea that the world is, or will shortly become, 'overpopulated' has been around long time. It can be traced back to Thomas Malthus and his 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population*. Its most famous modern articulation was in Paul Ehrlich's best-selling book *The Population Bomb* in 1968 and it has always been a component of the ideology of a wing (largely the more conservative wing) of the environmental movement as exemplified by James Lovelock, the founder of Gaia theory, Jonathan Porritt, erstwhile Director of Friends of the Earth (UK) and personal advisor to Prince Charles, and by some of the British Green Party.¹ Pioneer ecosocialist, Joel Kovel, has described how, driving round California in 2000 in his campaign for the Green Party Presidential nomination, he was left with a bitter taste in his mouth by the undercurrent of racism in the party masked by concern about 'population'.²

In the 1960s the claim was mainly that overpopulation was the cause of world poverty but as time passed the popularity of this argument faded; recently, however, the overpopulation argument is making something of a comeback in relation to climate change as evidenced, for example, by the increasing activity and presence of the 'charity' Population Matters. Moreover, some people on the left seem to have bought into the idea, for example the long standing Marxist and ecosocialist, Alan Thornett who, in his *Facing the Apocalypse: Arguments for Ecosocialism* insists that the left should see 'the rising human population as a problem to be addressed'.³

In this article I propose to reject all of this and argue against the whole idea that overpopulation or population growth should be seen either as a driver of climate change or as some kind of general 'problem'.

Climate change and population growth

When it comes to attempts to present overpopulation as a cause or exacerbator of climate change there are a number of straightforward and politically convincing arguments that socialists should understand and advance.

First, we know very precisely what the causes of climate change are: the projection into the atmosphere of greenhouse gasses- primarily CO₂ and methane – as a result of the burning of fossil fuels (oil, coal, and natural gas) and the release of methane (from cattle and the melting permafrost). This is not done by 'humanity as a whole' and is not caused by the size of the world's population. It is the responsibility of a relatively small minority of humans engaged in very specific activities.

There are many ways that this fact can be expressed. There is the fact that the carbon foot print per capita (measured in metric tons per year) varies enormously from country to country : in Afghanistan in 2018 it was 0.3; Albania 1.6; Brazil 2.4; Ethiopia 0.2, Australia 16.8; China 8.0; US 16.1; India 1.9; Ireland 7.7; Germany 9.1.⁴ Here it is interesting to note that Canada, Australia, Iceland and Greenland are among the least densely populated countries on earth (4,3,3 and 0.1 people per sq.km respectively) yet all have very high per capita carbon foot prints (16.9, 16.8, 12.1, 9.4 respectively) compared to a global average of about 5.0. Among the countries with the highest per capita carbon footprints are Bahrain (21.8), Kuwait (23.9), Saudi Arabia (18.6), UAR (22.4) and Qatar (38.2). Again, this has nothing to do with population size or density: Kuwait has 200.2 per sq.km; UAR 99 per sq.km and Saudi Arabia only 15 per sq.km. There are no prizes for guessing what it has to do with.

As it happens Ireland is also a good example here. Ireland, at 7.1, is above the global average in terms of

its per capita carbon footprint and as Leo Varadkar has conceded 'Obviously, climate emissions and greenhouse gas is an area where we're laggard and falling way behind'.⁵ Yet Ireland has a relatively low population density and, crucially, a smaller population than it had before the Famine of 1845-9, when its carbon footprint was more or less zero.

In short, the variation and level of carbon emissions has nothing to do with size of population and everything to do with the level and specific character of a country's and, by extension, the world's economic and social activities. It is also clear from the nature of these variations that carbon footprints will be grossly unequal within countries as well. It is not Brazil's favelas or Amazonian Indians that are producing its 2.4 figure, still less is it Australia's indigenous Aborigines who are responsible for its very high 16.8.

Then there is the well-known claim that 70% of greenhouse gasses emitted since 1988 have been produced by just 100 multinational corporations. There is the even more graphic assertion that it is possible to name the top 100 people killing the planet (the CEOs of the 100 corporations).

Whether or not these claims are exactly accurate can probably not be verified but they represent a much more accurate picture of greenhouse gas emissions than suggesting that they are produced by the world's population as a whole.

Let me put it this way: should there occur through some dreadful tragedy a repetition of the terrible famines of the late nineteenth century or some recurrence of the Black Death, which wiped out 200 million Chinese peasants, 200 million of India's poor and 150 million rural sub-Saharan Africans, while ExxonMobil, BP, Shell, Toyota, Nissan, Volkswagen, General Motors, the US military and suchlike continue their activities unaffected (which they would do) the reduction of the world's population by 550 million would have close to zero effect on the level of global emissions or the pace of climate change. To repeat population growth is simply not the cause of climate change.

From this follows that raising the issue of population is music to the ears of every rotten government, every cynical and opportunist politician, every oil industry spin doctor and PR merchant. It simply lets all the real culprits off the hook and directs all our concern,



The earth is not dying, it is being killed, and those who are killing it have names and addresses. – Utah Phillips
Jordan Engel/decolonialatlas.wordpress.com / June 13 2019

anger, and campaigning energy in precisely the wrong direction.

Insofar as capitalist governments and their media purport to address the climate emergency at all it is everywhere in terms of us ‘all being in this together’; we must all learn to ‘change our behaviour’, probably with the aid of carbon taxes on ordinary people. In Ireland this is exactly how the right wing Fine Gael government posed the question and exactly how RTE, in its week of broadcasts devoted to climate change, presented the issue. Any focus on population size is guaranteed to let these people and their equivalents, in every other country, off the hook, just as it would if we were to make any concession to the idea that the reason for the housing and homelessness crisis was due to the rising population and there being too many people.

This last example points directly to the third major reason for not accepting the idea of overpopulation as a cause of climate change: not only is it untrue but it feeds directly into racism. Without doubt many, perhaps most, of the proponents of population control would indignantly protest their innocence of this charge and even their avowed anti-racism and in many cases their protestations would be entirely genuine. For example, I do not doubt that David Attenborough, a lead patron of Population Matters, is not subjectively racist, while Alan Thornett is a long standing committed anti-racist. But it is not just a matter of subjective intentions; there is also the objective logic of ideas, not in a vacuum but in a concrete historical context. If it is argued that climate change is, even partially, caused by there being ‘too many people’ then this raises the question of which kind of people are there too many of and the answer is not going to be white Europeans and Americans. This is particularly likely to be the case when a very tempting excuse for Western politicians who want to avoid emergency climate action or tackling the fossil fuel industry is to say the real problem is China and India. And if more people are a problem in general then it is hardly a giant leap to suggest that therefore immigration must be restricted or reversed.

Thus, there has always been a racist tinge to advocacy of population control and to certain kinds of environmentalism. In the opening scene of *The Population Bomb*, Paul Ehrlich describes a taxi ride in Delhi in 1966 through ‘a crowded slum area’.

“The streets seemed alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping. People visiting, arguing, and screaming. People thrust their hands through the taxi window, begging. People defecating and urinating. People clinging to buses. People herding animals. People, people, people, people. . . [S]ince that night, I’ve known the feel of overpopulation.”⁶

As has been pointed out, Delhi in 1966 had a population of 2.8 million. In contrast the population of Paris at that time stood at 8 million, but no one cited Paris as an example of overcrowding or overpopulation. Rather it was seen as the epitome of elegance. Paul Ehrlich is a current patron of Population Matters. Another current patron of Population Matters is James Lovelock, producer of the somewhat mystical ‘gaia’ theory of mother earth. Lovelock argues that the maximum ‘sustainable’ population on earth is 1 billion; so which 6 billion are going to go and how are they going to be got rid of? Again, it is a fair bet it is not white British Lovelock wants to cull. In addition there are a multitude of small population control organisations with manifestly racist attitudes and policies – groups like *Californians for Population Stabilization* (CAPS) founded in 1986 which works to “preserve California’s future through the stabilization of our state’s human population”.

My favourite – and they would be funny if they weren’t so nasty – is *Sustainable Population Australia* (SPA) (formerly *Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population*). This is an Australian pressure group founded in Canberra in 1988, that seeks to establish an ecologically sustainable human population. SPA claims that it is an «ecological group dedicated to preserving species» habitats globally and in Australia from the degradation caused by human population growth», and that it “works on many fronts to encourage informed public debate about how Australia and the world can achieve an ecologically sustainable population”.⁷

SPA argues that population growth exacerbates Australia’s water shortage and adds to emissions. SPA also seeks to highlight what it claims are the negative economic effects of population growth, such as increased housing costs, lower wages and living standards, and opposes the current historically *high level of immigration to Australia*. [My emphasis].

Australia is the sixth largest country in the world

in area and has a population of only 24.6 million. At 3.1 per sq.km. it ranks 226th in a list of countries by population density (with only places like Iceland, the Western Sahara and Greenland below it. This gives you a clue that the size of the population is not really what Sustainable Population Australia are worried about!

Fear of encouraging or being tainted by racism is probably the main reason why many environmental (and other) campaigners refuse to take up the population issue saying things like 'I don't want to go there', or 'I don't see population in itself as the main problem' and in a sense that is quite reasonable and right but the issue goes broader and deeper than this and I want to argue that, even if there was no question of racism involved, and even if we are talking about other issues than climate change, the notion that overpopulation exists or that population growth is a bad thing would be profoundly mistaken. It is mistaken not in the way scientists and social scientists may over or underestimate the role of a particular factor in a situation. It is mistaken in the way those who believed (prior to Copernicus) that the sun revolved round the earth were mistaken i.e. The truth was not just different from what they believed but, appearances to the contrary, the complete opposite.

Impervious to evidence

One of the clearest signs of the weakness of the overpopulation argument is the way in which its advocates remain impervious to evidence which manifestly refutes their claims. The opening lines of Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) read as follows:

"The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now. At this late date nothing can prevent a substantial increase in the world death rate."

What actually happened? In 1968 the world death rate stood at 13.4 per 1000 of population. By 1980 it had fallen to 10.3 per 1000 and by 2018 it was down to 7.6.⁸

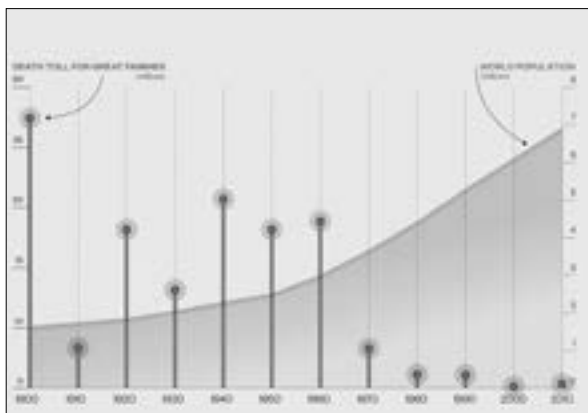
Ehrlich also claimed in 1969 that "Most of the people who are going to die in the greatest cataclysm in the history of man have already been born, "and in 1970 "Sometime in the next 15 years, the end will come ... And by 'the end' I mean an utter breakdown of the capacity of the planet to support humanity."⁹ And in 1970 he predicted that 'in ten years all important life in the sea

will be extinct' and in 1971 that 'by the year 2000 the United Kingdom will be simply a small group of islands inhabited by some hungry people...I would take even money that England will not exist in the year 2000'.¹⁰

On the first Earth Day in 1970, he warned that "in ten years all important animal life in the sea will be extinct. Large areas of coastline will have to be evacuated because of the stench of dead fish." In a 1971 speech, he predicted that: 'By the year 2000 the United Kingdom will be simply a small group of impoverished islands, inhabited by some 70 million hungry people.' "If I were a gambler," Professor Ehrlich concluded before boarding an airplane, "I would take even money that England will not exist in the year 2000." ... Ehrlich wrote in *The Population Bomb* that, "India couldn't possibly feed two hundred million more people by 1980."

When none of this occurred, he refused to accept there was anything wrong with his approach or method. He just said 'When you predict the future, you get things wrong. How wrong is another question... If you look closely at England, what can I tell you? They're having all kinds of problems, just like everybody else'.¹¹

I have focused on Paul Ehrlich here as the most famous name associated with the overpopulation argument, but the truth is that virtually all the predictions of all the population doomsters from Malthus onwards have been falsified by history. Of course, there are always 'problems' and disasters that can be pointed to: for example, the dreadful famine in Ethiopia in 1983-5 which claimed 1.2 million lives. For the lazy minded this could be ascribed to 'overpopulation', but the argument is nonsense. Ethiopia had a long history of famines when its population was much lower, it had a catastrophically incompetent government and there was more than enough food available to feed the starving Ethiopians if it could have been distributed to them. Moreover, Ethiopia in 1983 had a population of 37 million (half that of Britain in a country four times the size) and a Gross National Income per capita of \$210 per annum. By 2018 its population had nearly trebled to 105 million. Has it got poorer? No, its GNI per capita now stands at \$790 per annum- still very low but more than three times higher than in 1983. What is more with the rise in world population in the last 100 years the overall trend has been for the deaths from famine to decline.



(5w Infographics; Sources: World Peace Foundation, Tufts; Food and Agriculture Organization, U.N.)¹²

Vague alarmism

Faced with the dramatic refutation by history of these specific predictions the tendency of population control advocates and those who are ‘concerned’ about population growth has become to engage in what I would call vague alarmism.

A typical example of this is the world population meters that can be seen at the top of many population websites which purport to show the disturbing growth in population second by second. Now obviously if the world population is rising, as it is, and we are talking about the whole world it will inevitably be rising every second. This doesn’t mean there is a problem but, of course, it vaguely suggests there is. The same technique can be used by showing the number of births every second with the implication we should be worried about this.¹³ Note here the difference between attitudes to births in the abstract and the concrete. Concretely when someone has a baby the normal human reaction is to congratulate them and greet the birth of a new human life as to be welcomed. But in the abstract we are supposed to regard it as a misfortune. Or is it perhaps that white European babies are welcome, but babies of colour or babies of the Global South are not (as happened with the racist reaction online to the news that the first Irish baby of 2020 was black)? In any event this method of presenting worldwide or national statistics by the second or the minute to make them look alarming can be used for any and every purpose, e.g. the number of abortions per minute; the number

of muggings, crimes, road accidents etc. Unless put in context and set against a real benchmark such statistics may be emotive but have no real value.

At the head of the Population Matters website we find the statement:

It took humanity 200,000 years to reach one billion and only 200 years to reach seven billion. We are still adding an extra 80 million each year and are headed towards 10 billion by mid-century.¹⁴

But if the population is rising by 80 million a year that means that the rate of population growth is actually slowing. If that were not the case the annual increment would increase. And why should 80 million a year or 10 billion by mid-century be a particular problem. Population Matters and other ‘populationists’ assume it will be but offer no convincing reason. They just assume, or intend, that the figures will alarm people. Alan Thornett writes, ‘The human population of the planet is growing by over 70 million a year – almost the population of Germany. It has done so for the last 50 years and shows little sign of slowing down’.¹⁵ Thornett repeats the mistake. In 1973 the world population was approximately 3.9 billion. Today it is 7.7 billion. 70 million is a much smaller proportion of 7.7 billion than of 3.9 billion and the world population growth rate in 1970 was 2.1% per annum and now it is 1.2%. In other words, the rate of growth is slowing and IF the present trend continues the population will level out by the end of the century and even decline thereafter.

This whole discourse is predicated on a fear of large numbers of human beings which has many sources in our culture, not least the elite’s fear of ‘the masses’ or ‘mob’ and the perennial excuse that ‘rising/ ageing population’ and ‘too many people/an influx of immigrants’ provides for governments for crises in housing, health and education. If the same conscious or unconscious attitude applied to birds it would be possible, as Alfred Hitchcock probably realised, to scare people silly with the statistic that there are 200-400 billion birds in the world i.e. between ten and twenty times the number of humans.

Two terms that pepper the writings of populationists are ‘unsustainability’ and ‘carrying-power’. We are repeatedly told in their literature that current levels of population growth are ‘unsustainable’ as if this was obvious or proven. In fact, it is neither. The concepts

of sustainability and unsustainability are familiar in the general ecological discourse but let us ask what they mean in the context of population. If we say that China's rates of economic growth are unsustainable this means either that in the not too distant future, they will fall to a lower rate or that there will be a recession and they will go into reverse. If that is what the term means in relation to population growth, then what is really being said is that the rate of population growth will not continue i.e. it will self-correct. This would, of course, be reassuring rather than alarming but this never seems to occur to over populationists, much as it never seemed to occur to Malthus or Ehrlich that if population growth would increase poverty and starvation the increased poverty and starvation would reduce the population.

The notion that the earth, or even parts of it, has a fixed 'carrying capacity' is similar to 'unsustainability' but even less substantial and convincing. The carrying capacity of a bus has real meaning but what does the carrying capacity of the earth mean? The population of Hong Kong was 7,450 in 1841. In 1851 it was 32,983. Looking at Hong Kong in those days it would no doubt have seemed 'obvious' that this small island could not possibly 'sustain' or 'carry' a population of 7.4 million as it does today.¹⁶ Clearly they would all starve or eat each other long before such an unthinkable figure was reached!

Sometimes the overpopulation argument is put in terms of the earth has certain 'natural limits'. Are you saying, the population controllers ask, that the earth can sustain unlimited population growth, that it can support an 'infinite' number of people? But this is an absurd way to pose the question. 'Unlimited growth' and an 'infinite number' is so vague and potentially enormous that it would apply to absolutely anything or everything. Can the world carry an 'infinite' number of peanuts? Clearly not. Similarly, you could raise the alarm about the impossibility of coping with an indefinite or unlimited number of bees or trees. But this would similarly obscure the fact that right now, and for the foreseeable future, we need more bees and trees.

The only real meaning that all this alarmism has and can have is that population growth is driving climate change and other forms of ecological damage such as ocean acidification, plastification and destruction of the rain forest. But as we began by showing, this is not true

of climate change and the same arguments apply to the other forms of ecological destruction. The Great Barrier Reef is being killed off but by Australian mining and farming methods (along with climate change) not by Australia's 'vast' population. The terrible felling of the Amazon rain forest is not being done to provide space for Brazil's population, which is neither dense (at 25 per sq.km) nor growing very fast (at 0.72% per annum¹⁷) but to serve the profits of beef and logging corporations. The vast quantities of single-use plastic that are choking the oceans are produced by a tiny percentage of the world's population and, even more importantly, the decisions to produce and use that plastic are taken by literally handfuls of people.

A misanthropic argument

There has always been a fundamental contradiction in the populationists' arguments. They are alarmed at the size and growth of world population. But world population is NOT growing because people are having more babies, they are not. In 1950 the global birth rate stood at 36.937 per thousand; by 2000 it was 22.29 per thousand and today it is 17.464 (and predicted to fall to 14.634 by 2050.¹⁸ It is growing because the death rate is falling (infant mortality is falling, and life expectancy is rising). In 1950 the global death rate was 20.15 per thousand, in 2000 it was 8.647 per thousand and today it is 7.612.¹⁹ In 1950 global average life expectancy was 47.0; in 2000 it was 67.1 and today it is 73.2²⁰. Of course, as we know, there is increased alienation, exploitation and inequality, all brought to us by global capitalism, but in itself this rise in the population is caused by an improvement in people's living conditions, especially their nutrition and health care. In itself it is a gain for humanity not a cause for alarm or fear.

It is true that climate change and related environmental catastrophes have the potential to wipe out these gains, but this will not be because the population is too large but because capitalism, with its production based on competitive accumulation, was unable to break its addiction to fossil fuels. To blame the number of people for this and not governments and the system is not only to let the guilty off the hook but also to malign the innocent. In 1865 Marx called Malthus' theory of population, according to which population inevitably grew much faster than food production,

a 'libel on the human race'²¹ and the same is true of contemporary would-be population controllers. There is a deep-seated misanthropy involved here.

Unfortunately, we are not just dealing with a bad explanation or a reactionary theory but with an idea which can have, and has had, very reactionary consequences in the real world. Liberal and leftist populationists try to avoid this by denying they are for forcible or racist population control and stressing instead population limitation by means of 'female empowerment' i.e. contraception and abortion rights. Both Population Matters and Alan Thornett do this with Thornett calling population an 'eco-feminist issue'.²² But obviously the left have fought for these rights for decades, ever since the Bolshevik Revolution and before, without ever endorsing the call for population control and in the real world the people who will take up and implement this policy will not be liberals and leftists but governments who want to cut child benefit and authoritarian regimes like China with its horrific one-child policy²³ and India's highly repressive forced sterilisation programme under Sanjay Gandhi in the 70s.

The underlying problem in the whole populationist ideology is that its advocates see the mass of the world's people, including the international working class, simply as passive consumers and not as active producers, still less as people who can take collective control of society. This why they fail to understand that it was and will be perfectly possible to greatly increase food production and that the real problem is to ensure its equitable distribution. And why they fail to see that it is possible for those teeming masses in Delhi and Mumbai, in Jakarta and Cairo to smash the system that is driving us all towards catastrophe and create a new economic and social system in which the metabolic rift with nature is healed. And why they fail to see that from that point of view the more of such masses, increasingly proletarianised and urbanised as they are, the better.

Notes

- 1 See <https://policy.greenparty.org.uk/pp.html>
- 2 See Joel Kovel, Foreword to Ian Angus and Simon Butler, *Too Many People*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2009, pp.xiii-xvii.
- 3 Alan Thornett, *Facing the Apocalypse: Arguments for Ecosocialism*, Resistance Books, London 2019, p.152
- 4 These and subsequent statistics on per capita carbon foot print are from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_carbon_dioxide_emissions_per_capita
- 5 <https://www.independent.ie/breaking-news/irish-news/ireland-falling-way-behind-on-climate-change-action-admits-taoiseach-37668523.html>
- 6 Cited in Charles C.Mann 'The book that incited a world fear of overpopulation'. *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 2018 <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/book-incited-worldwide-fear-overpopulation-180967499/>
- 7 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable_Population_Australia
- 8 <https://knoema.com/atlas/World/Death-rate>
- 9 Cited in Mann, *as above*.
- 10 Cited in Mann, *as above*.
- 11 Cited in Mann, *as above*.
- 12 From Charles C. Mann, *as above*.
- 13 See for example: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>
- 14 <https://populationmatters.org/the-issue>
- 15 Alan Thornett, *as above*, p.130. Sadly Thornett's reference to this being 'almost the size of Germany' is a terrible argument. Racist anti-immigration campaigners often try to scare people by saying the level of immigration is equal to 'a new town the size of Birmingham'. Now I know full well that Thornett is not a racist and has no racist intention here but this shows the kind of bad argument his position on population leads him into.
- 16 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Hong_Kong
- 17 This compares to population growth rates of 2.9% p.a. in 1960 and 1.95% in 1990. Moreover Brazil's population is 87.6% urban and concentrated overwhelmingly in the coastal cities such as Rio and Sao Paulo. (All statistics from <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/brazil-population/>)
- 18 <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=world+population&d=Pop-Div&f=variableID%3A53%3BcrID%3A900>
- 19 <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/WLD/world/death-rate>
- 20 *As above*.
- 21 Karl Marx, Letter to J.B Schweizer, 24 January, 1865. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1865/letters/65_01_24.htm
- 22 Alan Thornett, *as above*, Ch.14.
- 23 Introduced in 1979 and modified in the mid-1980s to allow rural parents a second child if the first was a daughter and, incidentally, supported by our friend Jonathan Porritt who said, "Had there been no 'one child family' policy in China there would now have been 400 million additional Chinese citizens," <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/dec/03/carbon-offset-projects-climate-change>