

Discussion paper -The rising population of the planet: an eco-socialist and feminist issue

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This contribution was written in August 2012 as a discussion text for Socialist Resistance (SR), the British section of the Fourth International, after the FI had organized a seminar on ecology at the International Institute for Research and Education (IIIRE, Amsterdam).

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Introduction

At the Amsterdam a seminar in June 2010 a question was raised as to whether SR has a position on the rising population of the planet. There was a brief exchange during which I explained that SR has never adopted a position on it. When Sheila Malone and I proposed an addendum on it (very late unfortunately) at an SR conference a few years ago it turned out to be more controversial than we had anticipated, and since there was no time for a full discussion, it was not taken.

Since then the issue has not been discussed within SR as such, although the SR website carried critical review, by myself, of Ian Angus and Simon Butler's book on population entitled *Too Many People?* This led to a vigorous on-line debate, between and Ian and Simon and Sheila (who is unfortunately no longer a member of SR) and myself, in which a few SR comrades got involved and others followed the discussion - which can be found on ESSF website [[1](#)]

Too Many People? was clearly written as a response to Laurie Mazur's book *A Pivotal Moment - Population Justice, and the Environmental Challenge* which was published the previous year and with which Sheila and I broadly agreed. Although I have tried to limited references to these two books in this text it would make no sense to leave them out because the most recent debates on population amongst the ecosocialist left has centered around them.

Ian Angus, of course, has a long association with SR, has spoken at our events, and has made an important contribution to the concept of ecosocialism. Although I have strongly disagreed with him on this issue I have great respect for his wider contribution on Marxism and ecology.

I would strongly urge comrades to read both of these books, if possible, as a part of this discussion

in order to make their own assessment of them.

1) The problems of discussing rising population

As indicated above SR, as such, has never had a discussion on the rising population of the planet. This is surprising when you consider the scale of the subject and its impact on politics at multiple levels, and not least on ecology. SR, however, is certainly not alone in this. All of the radical left, as well as the Green Party, and the Green Left, appear to have had little discussion on it.

This is due, partly at least, in my view, to the way discussions on population tend to be dominated (or derailed) by the divisive debates and conflicts of the past 200 years. Allegations of Malthusianism, or even eugenics, are readily thrown around making such debates emotive and fractious. The 19th century economist Thomas Malthus, of course, famously advocated closing down the workhouses because they were, in his view, generating welfare dependency and thereby encouraging larger families and rising population which would outstrip food supply.

Those raising the issue of rising population today often face the backwash from these old debates and this has resulted in the issue of population remaining something of a taboo subject on the left.

There is also a right-wing and pro-life dimension around this as well, with Tory websites ranting on about mass murder by the back door and evil environmentalists who want to get rid of billions of people by stopping them existing in the first place. As a result of this those raising the issue of rising population (including socialists) are often caricatured as in some way anti-people - something they find deeply offensive.

All this has resulted in the issue of rising population being a seriously underdeveloped subject from a radical left/eco-socialist perspective.

It is true that there are still Malthusians and eugenicists around with some very unpleasant views and propositions to put forward. There are also those who see rising population as the source of all the problems of the planet and are ready to blame it for virtually anything - from wars to immigration to riots and road rage.

It is a mistake, however, to allow such views to skew or restrict our own debate and discussions. We have to get beyond the 19th and early 20th century debates and name calling to a new dialogue which is taking place today. We have to insist that population is an entirely legitimate and important subject to discuss, and we have to get the discussion underway.

2) The scale of the issue

The importance (and sheer the scale) of this subject is clear enough. The rise in the population of the planet has been dramatic over the last 60 years - particularly in the impoverished Global South. The global population has almost tripled in the last 60 years - from 2.5bn in 1950 to over 7bn today! This is a rise of around 80bn every year, which is the equivalent to adding the population of the USA to the planet every four years. This has occurred despite a drop in the rate of increase which has taken place since the immediate post-war period.

According to UN figures the population will reach somewhere between 8 and 11 billion by the mid-century. After that it could begin to stabilize - possibly doing so by the end of the century. The difference between 8bn and 11bn, however, is huge in terms of the impact on the planet. And

'possibly' is a very big word. It means that such stabilisation is far from certain. Long-term population predictions are notoriously inaccurate as demography shifts along with the economic and political configuration of the planet. There is, therefore, with such uncertain figures, a very strong precautionary principle to be taken into account.

Meanwhile, nearly half the current world population is under 25 - which is a huge base for further growth. How such a situation can be seen as other than an important factor in the ecological crisis and how we approach it is hard to understand.

It seems unlikely that a planet with finite resources, which are already stretched to breaking point, will be able to absorb such population increases without serious damage, even if the figures do stabilise by the end of the century. There is, therefore, an urgent need to stabilise the population, or at least reduce the rate of increase. (This text does not argue for a reduction in current population levels only its stabilisation.) Rising population is therefore something socialists (eco-socialists in particular) should integrate both into their analysis of the ecological crisis and in their responses to it.

A reduction in the rate of growth of the population, however, or even its stabilisation, of course, would not resolve the ecological crisis or guarantee sustainability - far from it. Nor would it eradicate poverty or prevent hunger. Continued reliance on fossil fuels could easily overwhelm any carbon emission reductions from slower population growth. A wide range of other ecological, economic and social measures, on a much shorter time scale, would need in order to do these things. But chances of success would clearly be better. It would be easier to provide food, freshwater, energy, and waste disposal and protect the bio-diversity of the planet at less environmental cost, to a population of 8bn, rather than 11bn or more.

3) Recent debates

For me discussing this issue became unavoidable last year with the publication of *Too Many People?* by Ian Angus and Simon Butler, with what I regarded as a fundamentally wrong line. It argues - with the support of a significant number of people from a green left environmental perspective it has to be said - that the size of the human population of the planet is not in itself a threat to its ecology. Even discussing it (particularly if you hold a contrary view to *Too Many People?*) is seen as a dangerous, or even reactionary, diversion, which puts you on a slippery slope towards Malthusianism.

The book scrapes together every argument it can find from the past which smacks of population control and make it the starting point of the debate today. The specter is raised not only of Malthus but of writers such as Paul Ehrlich and his 1964 book the *Population Bomb*, which presented rising population as the principal cause of all the problems of the planet.

Those who insist that there is a population problem to discuss are presented as a part of this genesis. They are presented as 'populationist'. By this it meant that they are a part of a new generation who advocate population control and who focus solely on the 'supposed evils of over population'. As I say in my review, rather than opening up a discussion on the left on population (which it claims to do) the book has more the hectoring tone of seeking to close it down.

This approach is not only methodologically wrong it is ultimately dangerous. If the left have nothing to say about the rising population of the planet - other than it is more or less irrelevant - the field is left open to the real populationists, and they will be very pleased to fill it.

What Too Many People? fails to do is to present the historical examples on which it places so much score in their historical context. Malthus, for example, was not only a bourgeois economist and a vicar he was also a product of the early 19th century – it is not so surprising he held the view he did. Even progressive people can get caught up in reactionary ideas. Marie Stopes who pioneered birth control in the first half of the 20th century (because she saw repeated unplanned pregnancies as wrecking the lives of poor women and exacerbating the poverty in which they lived) not only opposed abortion, but along with many others who saw themselves as progressive (HG Wells and John Maynard Keynes for example), supported eugenics. Margaret Sanger, who pioneered birth control in the USA, also embraced eugenics – though she quickly dropped it when Nazism took it up.

This does not negate the huge contribution these women made on contraception – since poor women flocked to their clinics in large numbers. It means that they were a product of the period in which they lived and were susceptible to some of the reactionary ideas of the day.

Too Many People? is right to say that capitalism is the root cause of the environmental crisis, and not rising population. It is right to say that stabilising the population would not in itself resolve the crisis. It is right to say that we have to have an alternative economic and social model to capitalism's unlimited growth. All of this is clear. What it is wrong to say, however, that rising population levels are more or less irrelevant. The current rate of increase is unsustainable were it to continue – and whether it will continue, or for how long, no one actually knows.

4) 'Control' or empowerment?

Laurie Mazur in her book *A Pivotal Moment – Population Justice, and the Environmental Challenge* presents a very different view to that of *Too Many People?* She argues that rising population is indeed a serious problem to be addressed and moreover (given that women are the producers of the world's rising population) it is first and foremost a feminist issue. The key to stabilising the population, therefore, she argues, is the empowerment of women. This proposition is far from new, but it is both very powerful and highly contentious.

Not everything Laurie Mazur' writes is supportable. But on the central issue of the empowerment of women she is right. Most women who have large families would not have them if they had the genuine right to choose to have smaller ones.

By empowerment she means giving women the means to control their own fertility by making contraception and abortion services available to them. She means giving them access to education, and lifting them out of poverty. Empowerment also means challenging the powerful influence of religion and other conservative influences such as patriarchal or communal pressure, which denies them the right to choose.

These are important objectives in and of themselves, whether or not they exert a downward pressure on the birthrate. One is not dependent on the other. Rising population levels simply gives them an added urgency. They are matters of human rights and social justice. As Mazur puts it: 'it is a win-win situation'. It is an approach that is good for women and it is good for the planet.

Too Many People? rejects this approach. In fact that is what the book is mainly about. It argues that such empowerment, which is laudable enough in itself, is actually (once the issue of population is introduced) a cynical means of introducing population control by the back door. The right to choose, it says, would, in reality, be a sham. What would actually exist would be population control. It conflates the concepts of control and empowerment throughout insisting that in the end empowerment equals control – that empowerment is only being raised in order to eventually exert

control.

But if empowerment equaled population control it would not be the empowerment of women but the abuse of women. It would be a contradiction in terms. What this text advocates (and what Laurie Mazur is clearly advocating) is not population control but the right of women to control their own bodies on a totally voluntary basis. It means giving women the ability to determine the size of the families they have (large or small) through access to abortion and family planning facilities. That is the only rational meaning of empowerment.

Population control is a very different matter. Control means the regulation of a woman's fertility by coercive means - whether such coercion is legal, economic, psychological, or by deception. It means the requirement of women to limit their fertility in line with government policies which violate civil liberties and human rights - such as in China with its one child policy or in India and Peru with their forced sterilisation programmes. It means the use of coercive measures (openly or by deception) which impose birth control against the wishes of the women involved. All such measures are abhorrent and should be opposed.

Not that women are passive observers in all this. The right to control their own fertility is something women have historically demanded and fought for, and continue to do so today - including in those parts of the world with the highest birthrates. They are the active agency of change in this field and this struggle has always included the fight against reactionary measures of enforced control. Reproductive rights were the lynchpin of the feminist movement of the 1970s and 80s. We should also remember how in struggling for their own specific interests, women often also become the agents of wider change.

5) The 1994 UN Cairo conference

Some important progress towards the empowerment of women approach to population was made at the UN Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994, which was backed by the US Clinton administration. The conference recognized for the first time both that current population growth was unsustainable and that the key to stabilising it was the empowerment of women.

Previous such international conferences, in Mexico in 1975 and Nairobi in 1985, for example, had been embroiled in battles with both the pro-life and population control lobbies and had produced very little. This time the feminists (or more precisely those feminists advocating the empowerment of women) won the day despite fierce opposition from the Pope and the Catholic Church and the pro-life lobby. It was an important breakthrough.

The result was the adoption of a Programme of Action based entirely on the empowerment of women free from any connotations of population control. It included not just reproductive rights but lifting women out of poverty and giving them access to education. This was not contextualised into a socialist or an anti-capitalist framework in the way we would present it, of course, because it was the UN. But it was important none-the-less. [2]

After the conference, however, the Programme of Action faced an increasing backlash from pro-life forces. Many of those governments which had initially supported it backed down and the decisions of Cairo were eventually largely sidelined. The arrival of George W Bush in the White House 2001 ensured that it stayed that way.

The conference did, however, give the empowerment of women approach to population an important mainstream dimension, and some countries did do something. The Bangladesh government, for

example, adopted a new reproductive health policy based on the Programme of Action which helped reduce maternal mortality by 20% by 2000 which saved thousands of lives a year.

Population Matters, for example, (Previously the Optimum Population Trust) which is headed up by naturalists David Attenborough and Chris Patton appear to focus entirely on empowerment - which was not the case in the past.

6) The Global South

The fact that by far the highest birth rates and lowest carbon footprints are in the impoverished countries of the Global South with the lowest population increases, including some stable or even declining populations in the comparatively affluent West, has led to the charge that the empowerment approach is in some way to target the women of the South, and to blame them for climate change. (There are exceptions to these birthrate patterns, however, with high birthrate in some wealthy countries (Saudi Arabia for example) and the continued above the 2.1 replacement level in the USA, but as a broad pattern the highest birth rates are in the Global South.)

The charge that advocating the empowerment of women means targeting of the South, however, makes no sense. Why is fighting for the rights of impoverished women caricatured as targeting them? The same was said of Stopes and others when they (as middle class women) fought for contraception facilities for the impoverished women of East London in the inter-war years.

What the empowerment actually targets is the appalling conditions under which women of the Global South are forced to live and the denial human rights to which they are subjected. There are huge disparities in reproductive health. In Sub-Saharan Africa women have a 1 in 6 chance of dying in child birth, in North America and Europe it is 1 in 8,700. What empowerment means is releasing women of the South from the poverty and high fertility trap to which they have been subjected with endless domestic labour and child bearing. It demands that they have the same opportunities as the women of the Global North and supports them in their struggle for such rights.

In the South children are often seen as potential wage earners and as the providers of a ready-made social support network. This exacerbates existing problems, as rapidly growing families are forced to degrade their own environments to get food, water and fuel just to survive. In the slums of today's megacities entire families, including young children, are often employed in various types of cottage industry (for example scavenging waste tips) in order to make a living.

Today over 220m women in the Global South are denied family planning services - which can be (and often is) the difference between life and death. There are 80m unintended pregnancies a year - of which 46m end in abortions. 74,000 women die every year as a result of failed back-street abortions - a disproportionate number of these in the Global South. Every year, around 288,000 women die from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth - and 99% of them occur in developing countries. Many of these are as a result of multiple pregnancies close together with inadequate or non-existent medical facilities. Millions of children die in their first year of life.

Preventing unintended pregnancies could reduce maternal deaths by 25 percent, saving the lives of 150,000 women and girls each year. Moreover, when girls go to school, get educated, and marry later they have fewer and healthier children. It leads to higher potential income, better crop yields, lower HIV infection rates, and reduced infant mortality. Refusing early marriage or avoiding exclusion from school because of accidental pregnancy can challenge oppressive norms of state religion and clan.

The proposition that most women in the Global South, given genuine choice, would choose to have the large families many of them have today is unconvincing. Some would but most would not. And when women are denied their legal and social rights along with education, employment, property ownership, and access to credit, they are forced to rely on child bearing for survival and status and security.

As already mentioned women not only want the ability to control their own fertility but they have historically demanded and fought for it, both North and South, and continue to do so today. We should remember how this approach empowered women in the North as well as supporting the struggles of the women of the South. In fact the pioneers of birth control in the North faced many of the same reactionary forces, and some of the same unfounded allegations, which are leveled today at those arguing for empowerment today in the South.

7) The carbon footprint in the Global South

It is argued that since the populations of the Global South have a carbon footprint which is a fraction of those of the North, the task is not to reduce their footprint but the footprint of the Northern populations. This implies that it is of little consequence whether the population of the planet reaches 8bn or 11bn by 2050, or whether it continues to grow until the end of the century. Of course the highly polluting populations of the North are the main priority in this regard, but we have to do both. In any case concentrating solely on the North only works if the countries of the South remain poor - something neither they themselves nor we would want.

Populations which today have a low carbon impact because they are forced to live in poverty and deprivation rightly aspire to change their situation and will hopefully do so. In fact some of the countries which have the lowest carbon footprint today have the highest economic growth rates.

It is also argued that rising living standards will resolve the problem of population growth. That as women are lifted out of poverty they will have less children, that development is the best contraceptive. And there is truth in this of course. Poverty is one of the drivers of high fertility rates, and its elimination would bring it down. It is, however, far from the only driver of the fertility rate. Women across the world are under pressure from other factors such as religion, patriarchy, and cultural pressure not to use contraception even after the issue of poverty is resolved.

In any case it is clear that development along the same lines as the North is leading to social and ecological crises in countries like China and India. China is now the highest carbon emitter globally, with an average footprint approaching that of France. We urgently need an alternative, non-capitalist development model in both North and South. Within this, however, and until we get there, the number of footprints matter - as well as their size.

8) Food and natural resources

It is argued in *Too Many People?* and elsewhere that if food production and distribution was rationally organised more than enough food could be produced to feed the rising population - that even a population of 9 or 10 billion can be fed in this way. It is true that if food was produced and distributed rationally things would dramatically improve. At the moment there are staggering inequalities. A billion people go short of food everyday and 200m children go to bed hungry every night. There is corruption and speculation on a grand scale and huge quantities of food wasted because it becomes unprofitable.

Does this, however, mean that a global population of 9 or 10 billion people could be fed without unacceptable damage to the planet? It is predicted that with rapidly changing diets as people are lifted out of poverty in the emerging economies (resulting in far more meat and vegetable oil consumption for example) alongside rising population food production could be required to double by mid-century, and water use by a similar amount.

It is true that there have been many predictions in the past that food production was about to be outstripped by rising population. Malthus was wrong about this in the 19th century and so was Ehrlich in 1964. This does not mean, however, that food can be produced for a population of 9 or 10 billion, particularly if it is to be produced without destroying the planet in the process. Feeding such a population on the basis of the ever increasing industrialisation and monopolisation of agriculture and the application of destructive or unacceptable technologies is one thing, doing it in a sustainable way is a different matter.

Then we have the growing impact of climate change on food production. This is causing floods and fires and droughts and extreme weather events on a much more frequent basis. It is depleting water supplies, expanding the deserts and disrupting agriculture. Two years ago Russian harvests failed and there were food riots around the world and it was a factor in triggering the Arab Spring. This year an even greater harvest failure is taking place in both Russia and the USA due to drought and abnormally high temperatures. In Britain the harvest looks like being 40% down due to abnormal rain.

Agriculture is extremely vulnerable to changing weather patterns and extreme events. Whether under such conditions enough food can be produced for an additional 2 to 5 billion people by mid-century seems optimistic in the extreme.

But even if enough food could be produced, and without vast agribusiness and environmental impact, food is far from the only resource which is involved. There is the overall carbon impact of such a population: the demands on natural resources, housing, transport, health care, education - even if this is done alongside a drive for renewable energy and energy conservation.

There would also be a hugely increased demand for water not only for drinking but for food production (which accounts for 60% of water use) and for industrial use - and this is heavily complicated by climate change which is reducing fresh water availability. The increased demands for energy will be on a similar scale. Yet 1 in 6 people on the planet get their drinking water from glaciers and snowpack, on the world's mountain ranges, which are receding. When they are gone so will be the water.

The impact of the human population on bio-diversity is itself at a crisis point. In the last fifty years human beings have modified the earth's ecosystems more extensively than in any period in human history. Due to human activity - habitat loss and degradation, climate change, excessive nutrient load and other forms of pollution, and the over-exploitation and unsustainable use of the resources of the planet - we are now losing species at a rate that is a thousand times higher than the average rate during the preceding 65 million years. Because the rate of change in our biosphere is increasing, and because every species' extinction potentially leads to the extinction of others the number of extinctions are likely to snowball in the coming decades as ecosystems unravel with a domino effect.

Urbanisation is another huge issue in this. It is estimated that there will be more than 3bn more urban area inhabitants by mid-century with accompanying problems of overcrowding, sanitation, and waste disposal. There are already 450 cities around the world with more than a million inhabitants. There are also 20 mega-cities with populations of over 10 million, and 8 of them have

populations of over 20 million.

9) Will it all be OK come the revolution?

Another argument advanced for regarding higher population levels as containable is that the abolition of capitalism, and the establishment of a socialist society, will eventually solve the problem. That capitalism is so wasteful that to eliminate it would free-up enough resources to allow the planet to cope with whatever level of population might arise.

This is wrong on all counts. In fact the same thing used to be said about women's liberation. Like women's liberation, however, the ecological struggle has to be carried through as an integral part of the struggle to overthrow and replace capitalism, not as a separate and later stage to it. Otherwise by the time capitalism is overthrown the environment will be so damaged that it will be a matter of picking up the pieces.

Also, unless you think that capitalism can be overthrown and replaced by socialism throughout the world in the next few decades (which might be a tad optimistic given the current relationship of forces) the time scale is some way out. Such an approach underestimates not only the impact of rising population but the severity of the ecological crisis itself and the amount of time available before it spins out of control.

In any case the idea that resolving the ecological crisis (or establishing an ecosocialist system of society) will be plain sailing once capitalism is removed from the scene is also optimistic - even though capitalism is the main cause of the problem. The fact is that the vast majority of the socialist/radical left have yet to be convinced that the environmental crisis exists let alone on the necessity to replace capitalism with an ecosocialist society.

The idea that overthrowing capitalism will automatically abolish the baggage which capitalism generates such as racism, women's oppression or environmental destruction, just because it established the objective conditions to do so, is extremely optimistic. Such things will only be abolished by a political struggle which has to begin in the struggle against capitalism itself. That's what ecosocialism is all about!

Alan Thornett, August 2012

Footnotes

[1] ESSF, (article 36138), ["Too Many People" - A review and a reply on the relevance of demography for ecosocialists.](#)

[2] The Programme of Action can be found at:
<http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/populatin/icpd.htm>