

“Too Many People” - A review and a reply on the relevance of demography for ecosocialists

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TOO MANY PEOPLE? A REVIEW

Alan Thornett reviews *Too Many People?* by Ian Angus and Simon Butler published by Haymarket at £13.99.

As a long-time comrade of Ian Angus, a fellow ecosocialist, and an admirer of his work on Marxism and ecology, I am disappointed by the tone he has adopted in his new book on population *Too Many People?*—which he has authored jointly with Simon Butler, co-editor of the Australian publication *Green Left Weekly*.

The thesis they advance is that the population of the planet is irrelevant to its ecology, and that even discussing it is a dangerous or even reactionary diversion—a taboo subject. They even argue that such discussion is divisive and detrimental environmental campaigning. [page 97]

The book appears to be a response to Laurie Mazur's very useful book published last year *A Pivotal Moment—Population, Justice and the environmental challenge*. This was reviewed by Sheila Malone in SR (July 2010), as part of a debate on the issue.

Mazur argues that it is not a matter of choosing between reactionary policies from the past but that “we can fight for population policies that are firmly grounded in human rights and social justice”. I agree with her on this point, though not with everything in her book.

I didn't expect to agree with Ian's book as such, since I have differed with him on this issue for some time. I did expect, however, an objective presentation of the debates without the ideas of fellow ecosocialists being lumped together with those of reactionaries and despots.

What we have is the branding (in heavy polemical tones) of anyone with a contrary view to the authors as ‘Malthusianist’—i.e. supporters of the 18th century population theorist the Reverend Thomas Malthus who advocated starving the poor to stop them breeding—or more precisely as ‘populationist’, by which the authors mean neo-Malthusianist.

They explain it this way: “Throughout the book we use the term ‘populationism’ to refer to ideologies that attribute social and ecological ills to human numbers and ‘populationist’ to people who support such ideas.” They go on: “We prefer those terms to the more traditional Malthusianism and Malthusian, for two reasons”. The first is because not everyone is familiar with Malthus and the second is because most of their protagonists don't actually agree with what he wrote. The “more

traditional term", however, never goes away. [page XX1]

This leaves the book stuck in the past, more concerned with rehashing the polarised conflicts of the last 200 years than engaging with the contemporary debates.

The authors are right to say that population is not the root cause of the environmental problems of the planet. It is capitalism. They are also right to say that stabilising the population would not in itself resolve them. But they are wrong to say that it is irrelevant. The fact is that current rate of increase is unsustainable were it to continue—and whether it will continue or for how long no one knows. What we do know is that it has almost tripled in just over 60 years—from 2.5bn in 1950 to the recently reached figure of 7bn.

According to UN figures it will reach between 8bn and 11bn (with 9.5bn as the median figure) by 2050. After that it could begin to stabilise—possibly doing so by the end of the 21st century. Even this, however, is highly speculative. Long-term population predictions, as the authors themselves acknowledge, are notoriously inaccurate. Meanwhile nearly half the current world population is under 25—which is a huge base for further growth.

Yet throughout the book the charge of 'Malthusianism' or 'populationism' is aggressively leveled against anyone who suggests that rising population is a legitimate, let alone important, subject for discussion. These range from those who do indeed see population as the primary cause of the ecological crisis to those who blame capitalism for it but see population as an important issue to be addressed within that.

This is reinforced by a sleight of hand by the authors over the term population 'control'. They refuse to draw any distinction between control and empowerment and then brand those they polemicise against—including fellow ecosocialists who advocate empowerment—as being in favour of population 'control'. This allows them to create a highly objectionable amalgam between every reactionary advocate of population control they can find—and there is no shortage of them including Malthusians—and those who are opposed to such control. This is then referred to throughout the book as "the populationist establishment".

My own views would certainly fall within this so-called establishment. Yet I am opposed to population control and support policies based on empowerment—policies based on human rights and social justice, socially progressive in and of themselves, which can at the same time start to stabilise the population of the planet.

Such policies involve lifting people out of poverty in the poorest parts of the globe. They involve enabling women to control their own fertility through the provision of contraception and abortion services. It means challenging the influence of religion and other conservative influences such as patriarchal pressure. They involve giving women in impoverished communities access to education.

These are major strategic objectives in their own right, with the issue of rising population giving them an additional urgency. Yet the book dismisses them as secondary, as issues already dealt with! This reflects the fact that the book has nothing at all to say on the substantive (and huge) issue of women and population.

Some important progress towards empowerment policies was made at the UN conference on population and development held in Cairo in 1994. This, for the first time, pointed to the stabilisation of the global population through the elimination of poverty, the empowerment of women, and the effective implementation of basic human rights. That its proposals were sidelined by a vicious pro-life backlash and the arrival of George W Bush on the world stage does not invalidate the

contribution it made.

The above approach, however, along with the Cairo Conference, is heavily slapped down in the book. In fact this is one of the author's principal preoccupations. Empowerment is presented as the slippery slope to not only population control but "at its most extreme" to programs, human rights abuses, enforced or coercive sterilization, sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, and even to ethnic cleansing! [page 94]

The authors put it this way:

"Most supporters of population control today say that it is meant as a kindness — a benevolent measure that can empower women, help climate change, and lift people out of poverty, hunger, and underdevelopment. But population control has a dark past that must be taken into account by anyone seeking solutions to the ecological crisis." (page 83) They go on: "...At its most extreme, this logic has led to sterilisation of the 'unfit' or ethnic cleansing. But even family planning could be a form of population control when the proponents aim to plan other people's families." [page 84]

The term population 'control' is again perversely attributed to anyone with contrary views and we are again warned of the 'dark past' of population debates and the dangers of engaging in them—and anything can be abused, of course, including family planning. But only enforced contraception, which we all oppose, could rationally be seen population control—not the extension to women of the ability to control their own fertility.

Equally mistaken is the crass assertion that to raise the issue of population under conditions where fertility levels are highest in the global south and declining in the north is in some way to target the women of the south and to blame them for the situation. For Fred Pearce, who endorses the book, makes advocates of empowerment into "people haters": "How did apparently progressive greens and defenders of the underprivileged turn into people-haters, convinced of the evils of overbreeding amongst the world's poor".

What the empowerment approach actually targets, of course, is the appalling conditions under which women of the global south are forced to live and the denial basic human rights to which they are subjected. It demands that they have the same opportunities and resources as the women of the global north.

Even more confused is the allegation that the provision of contraception to women in the global south is in some way an attack on their reproductive rights; an attempt to stop them having the family size they would otherwise want — a view which appears to be endorsed in the Socialist Review review of the book. If that were the case, of course, it would not be the right to choose but enforced contraception.

In any case the proposition that most women in the global south, given genuine choice, would choose to have the large families of today is not supported by the evidence. Over 200m women in the global south are currently denied such services and there are between 70m and 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.

After attacking empowerment from every conceivable angle the authors then appear to accept at least the possibility that not all of us who think population is an important issue to discuss support enforced sterilisation and human rights abuses:

"We are not suggesting that everyone who thinks population growth is an ecological issue would support compulsory sterilisation or human rights abuses. Most modern-day populationists reject the

coercive programmes of the 20th century, but that does not mean that they have drawn the necessary lessons from those experiences.” [page 95]

Unfortunately it is the authors themselves who continue to draw false lessons from the past: i.e. that the left should leave this subject alone, keep out of the debates, and insist that there is nothing to discuss.

The problem with this is that it is not just wrong but dangerous. If socialists have nothing to say about the population of the planet the field is left open to the reactionaries, and they will be very pleased to fill it. And one thing the authors are certainly right about is that there are plenty of such people out there with some very nasty solutions indeed.

Alan Thornett, January 02, 2012

* <http://socialistresistance.org/3013/too-many-people-a-review>

A REPLY TO ALAN THORNETT’S REVIEW OF “TOO MANY PEOPLE?”

We were pleased to learn that Alan Thornett, whose record as working class and socialist leader we respect, had reviewed our book, *Too Many People? Population, Immigration, and the Environmental Crisis* write Ian Angus and Simon Butler. We didn’t expect him to agree with all of it, but we were looking forward to an open and comradely discussion.

Unfortunately, his review misrepresents our views and issues a sweeping condemnation that ignores most of what we wrote. No one who read only his article would have any idea what the book is about.

As a result, our reply has to focus on setting the record straight, rather than, as we would prefer, on deepening and extending the debate on population and the environment.

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Since our book is about population and the environment, we were surprised to read, in the second paragraph of Thornett’s review, that we believe the subject is irrelevant. In fact, the word “irrelevant” appears in regard to population growth only once in our book – in the Foreword by noted ecosocialist Joel Kovel:

“while population is by no means irrelevant, giving it conceptual pride of place not only inflates its explanatory value but also obscures the essential factors that make for ecological degradation and makes it impossible to begin the hard work of overcoming them.” (p. xvi. emphasis added)

That sentence, which says just the opposite of what Thornett claims, concisely sums up our core argument – an argument that Thornett never mentions in his review. We wish that were the only case where he grossly misrepresents our views, but it isn’t.

For example, he accuses us of lumping everyone who disagrees with us – from some ecosocialists to reactionaries and despots – into “a highly objectionable amalgam ... referred to throughout the book as ‘the populationist establishment’.”

In fact, we use the term “population [not populationist] establishment” just twice (pp. 98, 103), not “throughout the book.” And contrary to Thornett’s charge, in both cases it refers to the rich Western foundations and agencies that finance Third World population reduction programs, not to environmentalists of any political stripe.

But more important than specific phrases is the fact that in *Too Many People?* we consistently “distinguish between the reactionaries who promote population control to protect the status quo and the green activists who sincerely view population growth as a cause of environmental problems.” (p. 5) Thornett offers no evidence that we failed to make that important distinction.

We could continue, but even a summary list of his misreadings would require too much space. We’d rather discuss political issues.

Numbers versus social analysis

Thornett’s most important disagreement with our book is evident in his warning that world population “has almost tripled in just over 60 year – from 2.5bn in 1950 to the recently reached figure of 7bn. According to UN figures it will reach between 8bn and 11bn (with 9.5bn as the median figure) by 2050.” Such growth, he says categorically, is “unsustainable.”

In other words, he agrees with the populationist view that where human numbers are concerned, big is bad and bigger is worse. Although he says that capitalism is the real environmental problem, he accepts an argument that separates population growth from its historical, social, and economic context, reducing humanity’s complex relationship with nature to simple numbers.

We, on the other hand, agree with Mexican feminist and human rights activist Lourdes Arizpe:

“The concept of population as numbers of human bodies is of very limited use in understanding the future of societies in a global context. It is what these bodies do, what they extract and give back to the environment, what use they make of land, trees, and water, and what impact their commerce and industry have on their social and ecological systems that are crucial.” (p.193)

Thornett’s simplistic number-slinging is particularly problematic in a review of a book that explains why such statistics are misleading and unhelpful. Simply re-stating some big is bad numbers, while refusing to respond to or even mention our criticisms and counter-arguments, doesn’t advance the discussion one inch.

Is birth control an environmental issue?

But what seems to upset Thornett most is our criticism of environmentalists who believe it is possible to reverse decades of horrendous experience by combining Third World population reduction programs with respect for human rights. He endorses the argument of liberal feminist Laurie Mazur, that “We can fight for population policies that are firmly grounded in human rights and social justice.”

We, on the contrary, argue that “population policies not only don’t pave the way for progressive social and economic transformation, they raise barriers to it.” (p. 105)

To Thornett, that means that we oppose empowering Third World women, and that we unfairly label supporters of voluntary family planning programs as advocates of “population control.”

In what he seems to think is a challenge to our views, Thornett describes the oppression and restrictions faced by Third World women who want to control their fertility. He insists that

ecosocialists must support the provision of contraception and birth control, and oppose any measures or policies that would restrict women's reproductive rights.

You'd never know from his account that we make the same point several times in *Too Many People?* Far from considering these, as Thornett claims, "as secondary, as issues already dealt with" our book explicitly includes "ensuring universal availability of high-quality health services, including birth control and abortion" as priority measures that ecosocialists should fight for. (p. 199) Once again, what we actually wrote was the opposite of his charge.

Thornett's false claim that we oppose empowering Third World women avoids our real argument: that Third World birth control programs are not an appropriate or effective way to fight the environmental crisis.

In the first place, as we show in *Too Many People?*, Third World population growth is not a significant cause of the environmental crisis – so focusing on population reduction would divert the environmental movement's limited resources into programs that just won't work.

And, as supporters of women's rights, we oppose birth control programs that are motivated by population-reduction goals because they so often undermine the very empowerment they are said to promote. In Chapter 8, we discuss coercive measures found in supposedly voluntary programs around the world, ranging from the crude (denial of financial, medical or social benefits to women who refuse to be sterilized) to the relatively subtle (mandatory attendance at population-reduction lectures as a condition of receiving health care).

A recent article by noted feminist and population expert Betsy Hartmann explained the dangers of population-motivated birth control programs this way:

"Equally troubling about overpopulation propaganda is the way it undermines reproductive rights. While its purveyors claim they support family planning, they view it more as a means to an end – reducing population growth, rather than as a right in and of itself.

"The distinction may seem subtle, but it is not. Family planning programs designed to limit birth rates treat women, especially poor women and women of color, as targets rather than as individuals worthy of respect. Quality of care loses out to an obsession with the quantity of births averted." (Climate & Capitalism, August 31, 2011)

Sadly, Thornett brushes these important concerns aside, calling them "sleight of hand," and insisting that the term "population control" only applies when there is "enforced contraception." That's an astonishing statement for any supporter of women's rights to make. Formally speaking, there is no "enforced contraception" in the United States, but, as feminist lawyer Mondana Nikoukari points out, there are "gradations of coercion" that cause women of color to be sterilized twice or even three times as often as white women. (p. 101-2)

Our comment: "If that's true in the United States, how can we imagine that in countries where legal protections are much weaker, population-environment programs will truly respect women's rights?" (p. 102)

We don't doubt the sincerity of those who support what Thornett calls an "empowerment" approach to limiting population growth. We know that they oppose coercive population control. Unfortunately, their sincerity won't protect poor women from the unintended consequences of the policies they advocate. Nor will it address the real causes of our mounting ecological crises, which – although Thornett doesn't mention it – are discussed at some length in *Too Many People?*

Should we discuss population ... or adapt to populationism?

In the Introduction to *Too Many People?*, we explained why we wrote the book:

“Our goal is to promote debate within environmental movements about the real causes of environmental destruction, poverty, food shortages, and resource depletion. To that end, we contribute this ecosocialist response to the new wave of green populationism ...” (pp 4-5)

So once more we were surprised to be accused of opposing discussion of population and its relationship to ecology. We clearly call for more debate, but Thornett claims we believe “that even discussing it is a dangerous or even reactionary diversion – a taboo subject,” and that “the left should leave this subject alone, keep out of the debates, and insist that there is nothing to discuss.”

On its face, this is an improbable charge. We have written an entire book and dozens of articles on population and the environment. We have spoken at public meetings, debated populationists in person and on radio, and participated in innumerable online discussions. Would we have done any of that if we thought the left should leave the subject alone?

Only in the very last paragraph of his review does it become clear that he doesn't really think we oppose discussion. Rather, he wants us to stop criticizing the “too many people” argument – the discussion he wants is not about whether overpopulation is a major environmental problem, but about how to reduce birth rates.

Our failure to do this, he says, is “not only wrong but dangerous,” because “the field is left open to reactionaries” who will use our absence from intra-populationist debates as an opportunity to promote “some very nasty solutions indeed.”

Liberals often urge socialists to moderate their political views, to avoid strengthening the right. We did not expect to hear such an argument from Alan Thornett. In reply, we can only repeat what we said in *Too Many People?*

“The real danger is that liberal environmentalists and feminists will strengthen the right by lending credibility to reactionary arguments. Adopting the argument that population growth causes global warming endorses the strongest argument the right has against the social and economic changes that are really needed to stop climate change and environmental destruction.

“If environmentalists and others believe that population growth is causing climate change, then our responsibility is to show them why that's wrong, not to adapt to their errors.” (p. 104)

Ian Angus, January 09, 2012

* <http://socialistresistance.org/3053/a-reply-to-alan-thornetts-review-of-too-many-people>

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Ian Angus is editor of climateandcapitalism.com. Simon Butler is co-editor of Green Left Weekly. Their book, Too Many People? Population, Immigration, and the Environmental Crisis (Haymarket, 2011) can be ordered from most booksellers. A free sample chapter is available online at <http://links.org.au/node/2520>