

Chelsea Follett: A History of Neo-Malthusianism³⁷

In 1798, English clergyman Thomas Robert Malthus published *An Essay on the Principle of Population as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society*, warning that out-of-control population growth would deplete resources and bring widespread famine. His preferred solution was to decrease birth rates by delaying marriage, but if that proved insufficient, he endorsed extreme measures to slash population growth. To prevent famine, he thought it morally permissible to “court the return of the plague” by having the poor live in swamps and even entertained the idea of banning “specific remedies for ravaging diseases.”³⁸ [...]

After Malthus died, the Industrial Revolution transformed Western society. It created unprecedented prosperity. Food became more plentiful even as the population grew. Malthusianism seemed disproven. Moreover, increased wealth led to more funding for sanitation, hospitals, and education and a decline in child mortality. That allowed for smaller family sizes and resulted in a decline in fertility.

In the early 20th century, as mortality rates among the poor declined, the “eugenics” movement emerged. It sought to prevent allegedly inferior people from reproducing. Roughly 70,000 people were forcibly sterilized in the 20th century under eugenic legislation in the United States alone.³⁹ Eugenacists and Malthusians often allied in policymaking, as they both believed that childbearing should be limited for people they deemed undeserving.⁴⁰

In 1952, population control and family planning activist Margaret Sanger, who was motivated by both eugenics (see her 1920 book, *Women and the New Race*) and Malthusianism, gave an address in Mumbai.⁴¹ In her speech she claimed that Mahatma Gandhi, the man who led India’s successful campaign for independence from British rule, once told her that he supported limiting couples to four children to combat “overpopulation.” She opined:

37 Neo-Malthusianism and Coercive Population Control in China and India: Overpopulation Concerns Often Result in Coercion, by Chelsea Follett, *Cato Institute*, available at <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/neo-malthusianism-coercive-population-control-china-india-overpopulation-concerns> (last visited Nov 23, 2022).

38 Thomas Robert Malthus, “Of the Consequences of Pursuing the Opposite Mode: Book IV, Chapter V,” in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: John Murray, 1826), http://www.econlib.org/library/Malthus/malPlong.html?chapter_num=47#book-reader.

39 “The Supreme Court Ruling That Led to 70,000 Forced Sterilizations,” NPR, March 7, 2016.

40 Adolf Hitler, for example, became obsessed with the Malthusian idea that available resources limit population and thereby justified military expansionism. See Ken McCormick “Madmen in Authority: Adolf Hitler and the Malthusian Population Thesis,” *Journal of Economic Insight* 32, no. 2 (2006): 1–8; see also Hitler’s words from *Mein Kampf*: “The annual increase of population in Germany amounts to almost 900,000 souls. The difficulties of providing for this army of new citizens must grow from year to year and must finally lead to a catastrophe, unless ways and means are found which will forestall the danger of misery and hunger,” as quoted in Bryan Caplan, “Hitler’s Argument for Conquest,” *EconLog*, March 19, 2005; and Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 84.

41 Margaret Sanger, “The Goal,” in *Women and the New Race* (New York: Brentano’s, 1920).

“[...] Those who do not have the individual initiative and intelligence to plan and control the size of their families should be assisted, guided, and directed in every way to eliminate the undesirable offspring, who usually contribute nothing to our civilization but use up the energy and resources of the world.”⁴²

The year she gave that address, Sanger founded the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), a global nongovernmental family planning organization that went on to provide technical assistance to China’s coercive one-child program.

The 1960s and 1970s saw rapid global population growth as economic development and the spread of medicine and scientific knowledge continued to lower mortality rates. During that time, Malthus’s view became resurgent, replacing eugenics as the primary motivation behind population control policies. In 1960, world population reached 3 billion. By 1975, it reached 4 billion. Rich countries’ governments started to fear that poor countries’ burgeoning populations would deplete the world’s limited resources, according to development economist Betsy Hartmann of Hampshire College.⁴³ Neo-Malthusianism was born.

As early as 1959, the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations recommended that aid be given to “developing countries who establish programs to check population growth.”⁴⁴ In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson made U.S. foreign aid dependent on countries adopting population control policies.⁴⁵ [...] In 1977, the head of that office [Office of Population], Reimert Ravenholt, said he hoped to sterilize a quarter of the world’s women.⁴⁶ [...]

42 Emphasis added. Margaret Sanger, “The Humanity of Family Planning” (speech, Third International Conference on Planned Parenthood, Bombay [Mumbai], India, November 26, 1952).

43 Quoted in Mike Gallagher, “Population Control: Is it a Tool of the Rich?,” BBC, October 28, 2011.

44 Quoted in Betsy Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1995 and 2016), p. 100.

45 For example, see Lyndon Johnson’s remarks in Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, 1 Pub. Papers 3 (January 12, 1966): “I recommend that you give a new and daring direction to our foreign aid program . . . to help those nations that are trying to control population growth”; and Remarks in Independence, Mo., at a Ceremony in Connection with the Establishment of the Harry S. Truman Center for the Advancement of Peace, 1 Pub. Papers 42 (January 20, 1966): “The hungry world cannot be fed until and unless the growth in its resources and the growth in its population come into balance. . . . We will give our help and our support to nations which . . . ensure an effective balance between the numbers of their people and the food they have to eat”; and in 1966, Johnson signed the “Food for Peace Act,” which required United States Agency for International Development officers to pressure the governments of famine-stricken countries to take steps to reduce their population in exchange for food aid, Hvistendahl, *Unnatural Selection*, p. 33.

46 Paul Wagman, “U.S. Goal: Sterilizations of Millions of World’s Women,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 22, 1977.

In 1969, the UN launched the UNFPA, which promoted the view that population growth was at the root of environmental problems and poverty, blaming the world's poorest people in particular. The "bottom billion often impose greater environmental injury than" all the other people "put together", the UNFPA said in 1992.⁴⁷ Increasingly prominent neo-Malthusians "spoke of a war on population growth", notes Matthew Connelly, a historian at Columbia University.⁴⁸ "The war would entail sacrifices, and collateral damage," Connelly wrote. "Poor countries were pressed to accept population programs and rich countries were expected to pay for them."⁴⁹

[...]

The increasingly popular goal of lowering the population justified coercive policies in the minds of some scholars. [...]

By the 1980s, the background document to the International Conference on Family Planning, cowritten by the UNFPA, IPPF, and Population Council, decreed,

"When provision of contraceptive information and services does not bring down the fertility level quickly enough to help speed up development, governments may decide to *limit the freedom* of choice of the present generation."

Many people saw coercion as acceptable because the overpopulation problem was deemed so urgent.

In a 1991 interview with the UNESCO Courier, the famed oceanographer Jacques Cousteau opined that humanity should not try to cure diseases because population "must be stabilized and to do that we must eliminate 350,000 people per day."⁵⁰ [...] In 2002, the UNFPA stated its mission to be "the universally accepted aim of stabilizing world population" to protect "the natural resources on which all life depends," but its use of the word "stabilization" was misleading [...]. Nafis Sadik, a former executive director of the UNFPA, clarified that stabilization meant "stabilization of world population at the lowest possible level, within the shortest period of time."⁵¹ [...]

47 Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*, p. 25; and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Population, Resources, and the Environment: The Critical Challenges* (New York: UNFPA, 1991), pp. 18–19.

48 Quoted in Gallagher, "Population Control," BBC, October 28, 2011.

49 Connelly, *Fatal Misconception*, p. 379.

50 Bahgat Elnadi and Adel Rifaat, "Interview with Jacques-Yves Cousteau," UNESCO Courier, November 1991, pp. 8–13.

51 Nicholas Eberstadt, *Population, Poverty, Policy: Essential Essays from Nicholas Eberstadt*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Washington: American Enterprise Institute Press, 2018), pp. 18–19.

The prevalence of neo-Malthusian doctrine among international organizations, government leaders and philanthropies became widespread. Through these groups, neo-Malthusians exerted moral pressure, sought converts to their cause, and offered financial incentives, rewarding governments in poor countries that enacted population control measures while sounding no alarms if those measures became coercive.

The results were catastrophic. [...]

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

How did Malthus view the human person? As a subject or object?

What did Malthus propose could be done to decrease birth rates among the poor?

What other movement was at the heart of population control policies?

How were population control policies implemented around the world?

Do population control policies tend to affirm or deny personal freedom for excellence?