

Population and Racism

There was a time when people thought that the population issue should be addressed in a forceful fashion. For example, China's one-child policy, which began in the late 1970s on the heels of a well-established two-child policy, was probably the most extreme effort of population planning ever implemented by any state. The Chinese government *required* contraception use, sterilizations, and abortions, as well as levied extraordinary fines for violators (i.e. couples that had more than one child). As you might expect, this program was a disaster.

We now know that if you educate girls and women and give them access to contraception (access to cost-free contraception is enough; there is no need to require its use), the birth rate will dramatically decline. Although, ideally, men should also take responsibility here, as they too can obviously use contraception, giving women reproductive control over their own body has proven to be the most effective course of action.

What I find so interesting about this approach to curbing greenhouse gas emissions is that it is a win-win-win. First, rolling back gigatons of GHG emissions is obviously terrific. Second, educating women and girls across the planet is also great in its own right. Even without the environmental gains, we should obviously make every effort to do this. And third, as far as I am concerned (speaking in part as a father of a daughter), every woman on the planet should have control, including reproductive control, of her own body.

This is not to say that implementing these cultural changes would be easy. It is arguably far easier to make major technological leaps (such as by making automobiles electric) than to change people's actions.

Indeed, if you think about it for even a minute, it's probably already obvious that we have stepped into a cultural quagmire here. Birth control is a hot issue across the planet, not only in the U.S. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, [97% of women do not have unrestricted access to an abortion](#) as an option of last resort. This is true in many parts of the world.

While it might seem that educating girls and women would be less controversial than birth control, let's not forget that we have a Nobel laureate (Malala Yousafzai) who, in part because she dared to suggest that girls in Pakistan should be educated, was the subject of a nearly successful assassination attempt. Even when not violently protested, education of girls and women is often a low priority - often a very low priority - across the globe.

And there is another problem: in the U.S. and other parts of the wealthy world, people who have advocated for a smaller global population have sometimes been racist, even if perhaps unknowingly. This is an ugly aspect of this situation with which we need to spend a little time.

If, over the past fifty years, you regularly asked the average American on the street to list their top environmental concerns, there is one in particular that you would likely have repeatedly heard over the years: population. This anxiety was partly fueled by an enormously influential

book from 1968, *The Population Bomb* by Paul and Anne Ehrlich, which predicted that an exploding human population would soon be disastrous for our species and the planet.

The interesting thing was that the U.S. population has not been exploding over this time - not by a long shot. In fact, the U.S. birthrate has been slowly declining over recent decades. After hitting a high of 18.4 per thousand women in 1970, the birth rate has declined to 11.8 in 2017. We are now below replacement rate of 2.1 births per woman, which means that over time the population of the U.S. would, if no other factors were in play, ultimately begin to decline. Hardly a “population bomb.”

In fact, the birthrate is so low now that we might rightly be concerned about an economic slowdown, except that immigration into the U.S. is fortunately sustaining our population.

So, why have so many Americans been made anxious by this notion of a “population bomb”?

If asked - and if they answered honestly - some Americans would likely have made clear that their anxiety didn't principally have to do with the U.S., but rather with places like India, China, and Africa. Across the continent of Africa and its fifty plus countries, women have far more than 2.1 children. In fact, on average, they have 4.7. If current trends continue, Africa's population will double by 2050. By 2100, a third of all people on earth may live in Africa.

So, there you have it. In the minds of many Americans, this particular “population bomb” is the number one environmental problem that we are currently facing.

But let's look at this issue with specific reference to the climate crisis and from the other side of the table: from the point of view of the poorest people on the planet. Incidentally, in 2019, [70% of the poorest of all people on earth lived in Africa](#).

As I have noted in previous segments, the poorest 3 billion people on earth have contributed a paltry 5% of all human emitted greenhouses into the atmosphere. In contrast, Americans have dumped a staggering 25% of those gases into the atmosphere, even though we constitute just 4% of the world's population.

Every year, [the average American is currently responsible for 16.5 metric tons of CO2 or equivalent gases being emitted into the atmosphere](#). [The average person in Sub-Saharan Africa emits just 0.8 tons](#) - less than one twentieth the amount.

Consequently, if you asked the average person on in the street in any country in sub-Saharan Africa to list their top environmental concerns, we should not be at all surprised if they replied that they were made very anxious by wealthy countries like the United States and our unchecked emitting of greenhouse gases. From their perspective, the very idea that we in the wealthy world would blame them for our global environmental predicament, especially with respect to the climate crisis to which they did little to contribute, may well seem outright ridiculous - and, let's be honest, they would be right; it is ridiculous.

However, it could be objected that perhaps there are other environmental issues not directly related to the climate crisis that come into play here. For example, more people need more food and water. That's just simple math.

Actually, the math isn't that simple. [The average American eats five or six times more meat every year than the average African](#). Since it can take ten or more pounds of edible plants to make one pound of meat, and [an incredible 1,800 gallons of water goes into producing a pound of beef](#), you could easily feed five, six, or more people in Africa with the same amount of resources that it takes to feed a single American. As there are currently fewer than four Africans for every U.S. citizen, Americans are, in effect, eating and drinking far, far more than all of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa combined.

So, what's really at the root of this concern over this particular "population bomb." There could be a number of things. Perhaps some of the people who hold this view simply do not know the facts that we have been reviewing. Fair enough.

However, let's just be honest and say it, racism may play a role here. Especially if the same individuals are made anxious by the fact that the U.S. birth rate is higher for people of color than whites.

Most of us have seen the frightening images that came out of Charlottesville, Virginia in August, 2017 and heard the chant "You will not replace us." As [the Anti-Defamation League notes](#), this chant "follows in the footsteps of the best-known white supremacist motto: 'We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children,' otherwise known as the '14 words.' The term reflects the primary white supremacist worldview that unless immediate action is taken, the white race is doomed to extinction by an alleged 'rising tide of color.'"

I am, of course, not saying that everyone who is concerned about our planet's swelling population is a racist.

However, when Americans suggest that global population is the root problem of climate change and look to places like Africa or India as examples, it is simply wrong. Incidentally, [in India per capita CO2 emissions are less 1/10th of the U.S.](#)

So, should we simply forget about population when it comes to climate change?

Absolutely not. We definitely need to stabilize and ultimately reduce the human population of this planet. However, as I have previously noted, greenhouse gas emissions should always be thought of as a ratio of emissions to population. In other words, we cannot just focus on how many people there are on the earth, we also need to consider how many resources each of them consumes and the corresponding emissions.

Focusing on population without taking into account consumption (and hence emissions) is simply misguided - and can even be racist.