

BOOK REVIEW

# Fatal misconception: the struggle to control world population

By Matthew Connelly

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Matthew Connelly, associate professor of history at Columbia University, says that *Fatal Misconception* was originally intended as a study of the international security threat caused by rapid population growth in poor countries. His research, however, made him realize that the real issue surrounding population growth is not so much national security, but the division between “us” and “them” or how some people have long tried to re-design world population by reducing the fertility of other’s.

Connelly examines population control as a global transnational movement because its main advocates and practitioners aimed to reduce *world* population through global governance and often viewed national governments as means to this end. *Fatal Misconception* is therefore an intricate account of networks of influential individuals, international organizations, NGOs, and national governments. Connelly emphasizes that the book is not a conspiracy theory with certain individuals or group leading the efforts for their own benefit. Instead, the reader is introduced to actors with various motives and goals who developed different and more or less successful initiatives. Because of the complexity of the author’s viewpoint and the sometimes chilling examples used, this is a difficult book to read. The story, however, is extremely interesting and important.

*Fatal Misconception’s* most compelling narrative is its description of how the road to social hell was paved with coercive policies that were promoted as being in the public interest and funded and rewarded by international organizations and developed country governments. For example, in 1983, Xinzhong Qian and Indira Gandhi were awarded the first United Nations Population Award to recognize and reward their accomplishments in limiting the population growth in China and India in the previous decade. During the 1970s, officials

in these countries had launched extremely ambitious population programs that were supposed to improve the quality of the population and halt its growth. The measures used were harsh. For example, slum clearance resulting in the eradication of whole urban neighbourhoods and the widespread sterilization of their inhabitants was an important part of India’s ‘Emergency’ campaign. In Delhi, hundreds of thousands of people were driven from their homes in events that resulted in numerous clashes, arrests, and deaths, while a total of eight million sterilizations were recorded in India in 1976. Sterilization became a condition of access to public services ranging from irrigation water and electricity to medical care, pay raises and promotions in public service. According to Connelly, it is impossible to know how many Indians were sterilized against their will, but the numbers must be staggering.

In China, the target of the one-child policy was to stop population growth by the year 2000. As a result, in 1983 alone, over 14 million abortions, nearly 18 million IUD (intrauterine device) insertions, and over 20 million sterilizations were recorded. Several incentives and disincentives for limiting the number of births were also introduced. For example, parents with only one child were given subsidies for schooling and health care, and priority access to housing. However, these benefits could be revoked if the couple had another child. The threat of pay cuts and the banning of children from the educational system acted as disincentives. Coercion was used when propaganda and persuasion proved insufficient. Individual birth permits were introduced and abortions were performed as late as in the eighth month of pregnancy. According to some reports, mothers were given injections resulting in stillbirths or early infant death.

Connelly’s book has a chronological structure and is divided into nine chapters. It sets out to discover

and explain different threads of the population control movement from its roots in Thomas Malthus's 18th century population theory to its culmination in massive fertility reduction campaigns in the latter part of the 20th century. The author begins by connecting the discovery of the idea of people as populations in need of control with the rise of nationalism and the institutionalisation of citizenship in the latter part of the 19th century. The need to reproduce national work force and armies created an interest among elite political classes to improve living conditions. This, in turn, called for monitoring the results of policy interventions and taking a closer look at individuals considered socially non-productive and harmful. Scientific advances also raised hopes that improving the make up of future generations could help solve social problems. Eugenicists and Malthusians worried that immigration of the "inferior races" and medical advances and poor relief without scientific population control would result in the unchecked proliferation of the weakest members of society and the degeneration of the "superior race".

Connelly emphasizes the impact of wars on population control ideology and policies. For example, the mobilization and the casualties of WWI strengthened the concerns about the state of the national populations and provided the impetus to increase efforts to "improve" humankind and increase fertility rates in the following decades. These included everything from relatively benign measures such as improving the health of mothers and infants to more draconian compulsory sterilizations and segregation of "defective" members of society into institutions.

As Connelly remarks, a modern reader might be forgiven for thinking that Nazi "accomplishments" in the field of eugenics would have discredited these ideas in the post WWII period. Instead, however, they started to gain ground globally, albeit with a different focus. The worry over the consequences of explosive population growth in the South became greater than the fear of "race suicide" in the West. Limiting population growth was therefore presented as an essential part of the modernization process of poor countries. In short, improved public health and reduced mortality rates had to be balanced by birth control, otherwise the proliferation of poor people would not only result in local catastrophe, but also drag the rest of the world along.

The rhetoric used also underwent some significant changes. Concerns over declining races were displaced by "rational family planning" that emphasized the principles of positive eugenics by encouraging the reproduction of "good parents". However, preventing the reproduction

of those considered unfit for parenthood by providing contraceptives and other measures was as important, if typically not stated in public. The most influential model of family planning was created by the Swedish social planning experts, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal. According to Connelly: "*The genius of family planning was to imply that parents would do the planning, whereas the Myrdals expected social engineers to create conditions that would shape parents preferences (and in some cases compel more rational choices*" (p. 104). Family planning agendas could include a wide range of measures from free school lunches and subsidized housing for mothers to legalized abortions and eugenic sterilizations. According to Connelly, the idea of family planning could incorporate activists with very different motives and goals, because it simply meant a more scientific and rational attitude towards reproduction.

Environmental concerns in a form that is now familiar to contemporary readers also became part of the population control movement in the post WWII period. One of the leading environmentalists was the American William Vogt who blamed increased population growth for widespread deforestation, desertification, and wildlife extinction. Vogt not only opposed food aid on the grounds that it would only delay starvation and actually ensure a greater catastrophe in the long run, but he also viewed diseases as necessary checks to prevent overgrazing and overpopulation. Like many present day environmentalists, Vogt viewed industrial development as essentially parasitic upon nature and therefore an unacceptable way to address development concerns. Environmentalists also linked environmental concerns with eugenics. Vogt, for example, favoured monetary sterilization bonuses because he considered paying small cash incentives to "permanently indigent individuals" as more cost-effective for society than facing the consequences of the genetic and social degeneration caused by them. (see also the Desrochers and Hoffbauer article in this issue).

As mentioned earlier, one of Connelly's main arguments is that the population control movement was initiated and developed by networks of influential individuals and NGOs rather than being designed by national governments. Indeed, it was not until population control was recognized as a significant issue by the UN in the early 1960s that the question began to attract significant funding. A big breakthrough for the movement came in the latter part of the decade with Paul Erlich's *Population Bomb* (1968) and other similarly catastrophist titles that gave new urgency to old fears. At this point, demands to move "beyond family planning" to coercion became increasingly common.

Expanding population control programs required increased resources and much of the panic generated at the time grew out of fund-raising concerns. A significant threshold in this respect was crossed following the decision of the US Congress in 1967 to earmark funds in USAID's budget for family planning. From this point onward, large share of the NGO funding came from foreign aid budgets and agencies with USAID being the most significant one. Actually, international aid played an important role in shaping national family planning programs because it was easier to get (sometimes reluctant) national governments to agree to these goals when the bills were paid by foreign donors.

Connelly describes the population movement at its pinnacle as a huge fund raising machinery that devoted ever increasing amounts of resources to the creation and implementation of ever more ambitious population control crash programs. His story culminates with the founding of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) and to the large-scale co-operation of USAID, UNFPA, World Bank, and NGOs to halt world population growth country by country. In the beginning of the 1970s, UNFPA was funding nine hundred projects involving nearly one hundred countries. The determination with which these programs were implemented is nothing short of astonishing. For example, in Indonesia's population program some thirty thousand workers were hired and 115,500 community leaders were trained to support the program. Male heads-of-households were required to report in public meetings whether their families were using contraception. The results were used to re-enforce usage. Some community leaders even beat drums to remind women to take their pills. The UN population program reached its apex 1970s and 1980s when UNFPA awarded its largest grants ever to support programs in India and China. According to Connelly, these funds ultimately contributed to the rejection of the idea of population control and the demise of this movement.

*Fatal Misconception* is an important contribution to the study of the history of population and social policies. A transnational viewpoint reveals the nature of the population control movement as a network. It shows that historical interpretations that remain confined to national borders are often incomplete, if not misguided, because national policies are often strongly influenced by broader transnational movements. For example, as Connelly remarks, legislation for eugenic sterilization was passed simultaneously in many countries in the early 20th century, including Nordic countries, with very few political or public protests. One important factor in this

respect was that this legislation was promoted mainly by medical and other experts belonging to transnational scientific networks. Eugenics was considered the domain of these experts, and arguments from authority went virtually unchallenged.

Adopting a global approach, however, implies that local contexts and differences are often treated superficially or unsatisfactorily. While Connelly tells his story from the viewpoint of the most important actors in the population movement, the interplay between the powerful and wide-ranging transnational trends and local contexts should not be entirely omitted. For example, although the Finnish eugenics movement was in many respects similar to those in Germany and other Nordic countries, the majority of the sterilizations in Finland were performed as late as in the 1950s and 1960s<sup>1</sup>. In other Nordic countries their number went down rapidly in the beginning of the 1950s. One explanation for this is that the construction of the Finnish welfare state truly kicked off only after WWII, considerably later than in neighbouring countries. Hence, the Finnish sterilization policy has to be examined in relation to the development of other welfare institutions, such as the institutional care for the intellectually disabled.

This brings us to the link between population and social policies. It brings out the fact that there are always certain goals and motives behind social policy interventions, such as supporting maternal health care and that social policy has often been a means of striving for certain demographic goals. As Connelly's analysis shows, the huge death toll of the first World War and the political situation in the interwar period generated a significant interest in "investing" in future generations. When governments began to pay the costs of procreation, the issue became a public matter and people's reproductive choices came under increased scrutiny.

A central part of Connelly's argumentation is that population control, as a global movement, does not exist anymore. NGOs and international aid organisations have been forced to change their attitudes and methods as a result of determined opposition, various intellectual critiques, and the rejection of the population control agenda by most governments. However, most of the associated public bureaucracies have not been terminated, but rather moved to a new agenda emphasizing the fight for equal rights, such as right to development and women's access to education, work and reproductive rights.

In documenting this shift in the nature of the population control movement, Connelly moves from chronicler and critic to cautious advocate of the newly purposed

entities. While he worries that the declining birth rates and “aging” populations in advanced economies could result in coercive pro-natalist campaigns, he nevertheless fears the inequality that might result for example from genetic counselling. He argues that, if these services are not universally available, the cumulative effect of individual choices could endow the privileged few with genetic advantages over others. In order to avoid these threats, he suggests that reproductive rights should be secured to everybody. In addition to freedom from coercion and manipulation, people should have equal access to childcare, birth control, infertility treatment, and genetic counselling. As he views it, freedom of choice is not enough because choices can be conditioned by design.

Underlying this dubious public policy proposal is a failure to distinguish between positive and negative rights. Negative rights, i.e. the right to be free from interference, underpin concerns about population control policies. Positive rights, i.e., the right to be provided with something, always pose an obligation on others to do something – and as such inherently conflict with negative rights. Even if we were to accept in principle that some violation of absolute negative rights is desirable on redistributive grounds, it is not clear that the specific form of redistribution proposed by Connelly is desirable. It is precisely with the kind of policies he is suggesting, such as securing infertility treatment or genetic counselling to everybody that manipulation of individual choices is made possible. For example if governments sponsor genetic counselling or birth control, there is a clear presupposition that the increasing usage of these services is desirable. Thus paying for these services is intended to steer people’s behaviour. If people are offered subsidised or “free” services, their choices are unlikely to be the same as they would be if they would be if only their consumption possibilities were increased or in other words, if they received money without strings. As Connelly himself puts it: “*The great tragedy of population control, the fatal misconception, was to think that one could know other people’s interests better than they knew it themselves.*” (p.378).

Worse, there is potential for such policies to become more expressly coercive. There are examples in the Nordic countries of incidents where health care personnel have

failed to inform future mothers of the voluntary character and purpose of prenatal screening, or where people have been persuaded to abort foetuses when there has been a high probability of being born with an intellectual disability – even though such “advice” is contrary to current legislation. In part this is an inevitable consequence of the collectivisation of risk created by the welfare state. Pressure on public finances means that savings in public health care and other services can be perceived as acceptable or legitimate reasons for aborting defective foetuses. It also makes sense that there is a constant discussion in the welfare states about the “quality” of the local population. There is a huge pressure to steer individual choices because of the costs that aging, obesity, smoking, drinking, lack of exercise, and other “bad habits” inflict on public health care and social services.

*Fatal Misconception* shows that there were people in the population control movement with good intentions, whose aim was to reduce inequality, not to coerce others. However, they compromised and ended up using family planning as a vehicle for population control. In Connelly’s opinion, future systems advocating reproductive rights “*must have a heart and brain and run on more than money*” (p. 383), but his own analysis and the welfare state rationale stated above suggest that we should be more sceptical. There is always a significant risk that even the best intentions will generate bad outcomes when private choices are brought over to the public sphere through policies promoting a certain social agenda. Thus, in the future, instead of promoting certain things as universal positive rights, we should concentrate on preventing outside coercion and manipulation by securing reproductive choices as private matters.

## Notes

1. The record year was 1960 with 514 eugenic sterilizations. In total, 7530 eugenic sterilizations were performed in Finland in 1935–1970. Mattila, M. 1999. *Kansamme parhaaksi. Rotuhygienia Suomessa vuoden 1935 sterilointilakiin asti*. Helsinki, Suomen Historiallinen Seura.