

To inherit the Earth. Imagining world population, from the yellow peril to the population bomb

Matthew Connelly

History Department, Columbia University, 611 Fayerweather Hall, MC 2508,
1180 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10027, USA
E-mail: mjc96@columbia.edu

Abstract

This article narrates the development of a set of ideas and provocative imagery about population growth and movement that has shaped the way people think about world politics. It represented humanity in terms of populations that could and should be controlled to prevent degeneration and preserve civilization. During the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this discursive tradition supported a series of political projects that aimed to either exclude those deemed able to subsist on less and reproduce more or regulate reproduction worldwide. Conceiving of the world in terms of populations – rather than nation-states – led people to think of new ways in which it might be divided, unsettling diplomatic alignments and alliances. But it also contributed to critiques of state sovereignty, since population problems were said to affect everyone and require a united response. This intellectual history helps illuminate some of the local and parochial reasons why people began to ‘think globally’.

Introduction

If the remit of global history includes explaining how people conceive of the world, it cannot exclude the history of ideas. It was intellectual history that demonstrated how nations, civilizations, and even continents have not been natural or neutral categories of analysis, but instead served political agendas legitimating inequality within and between societies.¹ Yet as much as this work inspired global history, most practitioners focus on political economy, leaving aside the question of how and why people began to ‘think globally’.

Thus, we have histories of world population, but not of how people began to count themselves as part of the population of the world and conceive of it as an object of policy that could be measured and manipulated. We calculate and compare rates of resource use, productivity, and fertility across space and time, without considering how, in the past,

1 See, respectively, Peter Novick, *That noble dream: the ‘objectivity question’ and the American historical profession*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; Gilbert Allardyce, ‘The rise and fall of the western civilization course’, *American Historical Review* 87, 3, 1982, pp. 695–725; Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The myth of continents: a critique of metageography*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.

people made such comparisons in order to work out whether they were part of the same race, or even the same species. The concept of world population may appear to require no explanation, much less an intellectual and political history. Yet this most basic idea of human community has actually been the subject of long struggle. Rather than creating a sense of shared fate, it has often prompted a simple but profound question, ‘who shall inherit the Earth’, one that has proven deeply unsettling.

No one article can describe all the ways people in different places have thought about world population. While exploring diverse perspectives, this account narrates the development of a particular discursive tradition which represented certain European peoples as sharing a level of civilization that depended on balancing reproduction with available resources. By regulating their fertility, they prevented the degeneration caused by ‘overpopulation’. Yet survival depended on either maintaining spatial and social distance from those able to subsist on less and reproduce more, or creating new norms and institutions to regulate reproduction worldwide. All along, scientists and activists mobilized support for such schemes not just with theories and data, but with imagery meant to provoke fear and disgust, and make slow-changing demographic trends seem ‘explosive’.

This account focuses on what Americans, in particular, read and wrote, because they had an influence far in excess of their numbers. They were the first to pursue population policies intended to have a global impact. They played a leading role in institutionalizing both the science of demography and the political strategy of ‘family planning’, at the same time mentoring cohorts of protégés around the world. They were also disproportionately represented in the international and non-governmental organizations that designed the first population control programs, which were largely funded by public and private sources in the US. Many realized that their agenda reflected their ethnic identity, worried about the reaction this might provoke, and therefore sought to present uncontrolled population growth as a problem affecting all humanity.²

This article begins by describing the intellectual origins of a certain approach to world politics in which relations of wealth and power were thought to reflect population dynamics. The different sections describe how this inspired an array of projects to control the mobility, ‘quality’, or quantity of world population. One of the most striking and persistent is ‘world eugenics’, which sought to apportion territory according to a hierarchy of the fit and the unfit. In the era of great power conflict, imagining a world of populations – rather than nation states – forced reconsideration of diplomatic alignments and alliances. At the same time, the rise of demography as a discipline contributed to the emergence of a *global* identity – either because political problems were assumed to be biological in origin, potentially affecting the whole species, or because the solutions required superseding the institution of state sovereignty. While these different tendencies continue to inform contemporary debates about demographic trends, this account concludes circa 1970, showing how they helped to inspire a global campaign to control the population of the world.

2 ‘Population control’ refers to policies and programs intended to achieve demographic goals, including the use of family planning as a strategy and slogan to reduce fertility rates. But it is important to note that, while they are not the subject of this article, many people promoted reproductive rights and health regardless of the demographic consequences.

The idea of world eugenics

There is a long tradition, predating the landmark ‘Essay on the principle of population’ by Thomas Malthus, of predicting that population growth would lead to starvation, pestilence, and war. In 1682 the man who has been called the father of modern political economy, Sir William Petty, wrote that if world population continued doubling it would eventually reach 10 billion, at which time he predicted ‘wars, and great slaughter &c’.³ Predictions of this kind have continued apace. But the concern here is more specifically how population growth has caused people to imagine new ways in which the world might be divided or united: recasting diplomatic relations or even transcending the state system. Both tendencies proceed from a sense of scarcity, since population growth would lack political salience if the means to support it were infinitely abundant and readily at hand.

In what may be the first proposal for a policy to shape world population, Benjamin Franklin noted in 1751 that fertility rates were higher in settlement colonies like North America because subsistence was easier than in Europe. But if new settlers proved more industrious and frugal, ‘they will gradually eat the Natives out’. He was especially concerned about ‘swarthy’ German immigrants, but derived a more global conclusion:

... the Number of purely white People in the World is proportionably very small ... I could wish their Numbers were increased. And while we are, as I may call it, *Scouring* our Planet, by *clearing America* of Woods, and so making this Side of our Globe reflect a brighter Light to the Eyes of Inhabitants in *Mars* or *Venus*, why should we, in the Sight of Superior Beings, darken its People? Why increase the Sons of *Africa*, by planting them in *America*, where we have so fair an Opportunity, by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys, of increasing the lovely White and Red? But perhaps I am partial to the Complexion of my Country, for such Kind of Partiality is natural to Mankind.⁴

Those concerned about population trends would often adopt this planetary perspective – seeing the Earth as a whole – even when, as in this case, it was to imagine how it should be divided between different races, and not all were as forthright as Franklin in admitting their ‘partiality’ in pursuing such schemes.

Malthus’s main contribution to this intellectual tradition was to posit the problem of scarcity as something that no human community could escape. Misplaced charity would merely expand the scope of the ensuing disaster. In a famous passage, he likened surplus population – i.e. those unable to earn their way in ‘a world already possessed’ – to uninvited guests at ‘nature’s mighty feast’. For Malthus, there were two kinds of people: those who could support themselves and those who could not, and the security of one demanded the exclusion of the other.⁵ His contemporary, David Ricardo, developed a theory according

3 ‘Essays on mankind and political arithmetic’, 1682, <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/mkpa10.txt> (consulted 8 March 2006); and see also Paul Demeny, ‘Demography and the limits to growth’, in Michael S. Teitelbaum and Jay M. Winter, eds., *Population and resources in western intellectual traditions*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 213–44.

4 ‘Observations concerning the increase of mankind, peopling of countries, etc.’, in Frank Luther Mott and Chester E. Jorgenson, eds., *Benjamin Franklin: representative selections, with introduction, bibliography, and notes*, New York: American Book Company, 1936, pp. 221–3.

5 *An essay on the principle of population*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 249.

to which population growth intensified the competition that kept wages at their 'natural price', i.e. the level of subsistence. But he also noted that the Indians and the Irish started families on wages that would starve Englishmen.⁶

If the level of subsistence was socially constructed, as Ricardo suggested, might there nevertheless be biological consequences? The Malthusian idea of an unceasing struggle for existence inspired Darwin as an explanation for how and why species evolved.⁷ Herbert Spencer, who first coined the term 'survival of the fittest', argued that the same process explained the supremacy of European peoples, and would continue working to their benefit.⁸ Others concluded instead that if they had to compete head-to-head the meekest and most fecund examples of humanity might supplant all the rest.

Americans began to use this argument in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to oppose Chinese immigration. In 1877, a special House-Senate committee explained that they could thrive on wages that would debase other men, concluding that 'the Pacific coast must in time become either American or Mongolian'. The next year M. J. Dee wrote in *The North American Review* that this competition had a direct effect on the fertility rates of Americans of European origin. He too focused on 'revolting characteristics' as the key Chinese advantage. 'Constant over-population' had taught them 'to live in swarms'. They would 'drive the vulture from his prey, or devour the unclean bird itself'.⁹ Like many who succeeded him, in arguing for 'artificial selection' Dee sought to provoke not only fear, but disgust, an emotion that precluded compassion while legitimating the defense of social distance.¹⁰

As Adam McKeown argues, the US together with Australia, Canada and South Africa were the first countries to bar Asian immigration because of a shared conviction that popular sovereignty could not survive an influx of people judged unfit for democracy.¹¹ A large English-language literature warning of imminent 'invasion' helped to uphold this judgement. From pulp novels through to the Fu Manchu serial by Sax Rohmer, Asian migrants were often depicted as a nameless, faceless, force of nature through such images as a flood, tide, wave or, alternatively, as ants, bees, etc. Unthinking, indifferent to pain, they move as one whilst earlier cohorts form a fifth column to clear the path before them. What appeared most frightening was the prospect that Asians might one day combine overwhelming numbers with advanced technology. In other countries, the

6 *On the principles of political economy and taxation*, 1821, <http://www.econlib.org/library/Ricardo/ricP.html> (consulted 2 May 2006). I am grateful to Ken Pomeranz for this reference.

7 Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian revolution*, New York: Norton, 1959, 1968, pp. 159–61.

8 Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American thought*, rev. ed., Boston: Beacon, 1955, pp. 38–9; Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American thought 1860–1945: Nature as model and nature as threat*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 85–6.

9 *Report of the Special Joint Committee to investigate Chinese*, Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1877, p.v.; M. J. Dee, 'Chinese immigration', *North American Review*, 126, 1878, pp. 510, 513–14, 523–6.

10 William Ian Miller, *The anatomy of disgust*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 9, 26, 251. See also Francis Walker, *Discussions in economics and statistics*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1899, pp. 420–2, 424–5, 438–9, 447.

11 Book manuscript on Asian migration and the globalization of border controls provided to author.

Asian threat was more often construed as one of economic competition rather than immigration.¹²

This way of representing Asians as irredeemably ‘other’ legitimated an international system premised on the sovereign right of states to bar entry according to any criteria they deemed appropriate. In time, most states in the Americas would explicitly exclude Asian migrants. Others followed a formula first developed in South Africa that used a literacy test to achieve the same end.¹³ The rationale for Asian exclusion could be applied to many more groups. In the UK, Eastern Europeans – especially Jews – were thought to present the same danger as the Chinese because of their ‘pestilential habits’. Similarly, the Italians came to be known as ‘the Chinese of Europe’.¹⁴ Even where there were virtually no Chinese, the figure of the ‘coolie’ symbolized global economic competition, representing it as a biological process in which a race to the bottom led to racial degeneration.

The idea that migration might lead to degeneration thus spread beyond settlement colonies, creating a basis for cooperation with the nascent eugenics movement on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁵ Eugenicians pointed to differential fertility rates and projected population trends to prove that society was already degenerating. In different contexts they focused on the growth of disease, criminality, or degraded classes rather than ethnic minorities. But the figure of the immigrant often served to embody these diverse concerns. It represented the immanence – and imminence – of this threat in a way more easily and vividly conjured than dry tables detailing differential fertility. In time, even scientists would begin to refer to ‘native stocks’ they considered unfit as ‘alien’.¹⁶

In 1919 the veteran leader of the US Immigration Restriction League, Prescott F. Hall, argued that like-minded immigration opponents and eugenicians were really engaged in the same global project. Eugenics within societies – ‘limiting or preventing the multiplication of the unfit’ – provided a model for what Hall called ‘World-eugenics’ aimed at ‘races as wholes’:

Just as we isolate bacterial invasions, and starve out the bacteria by limiting the area and amount of their food supply, so we can compel an inferior race to remain in its native habitat, where its own multiplication in a limited area will, as with all organisms, eventually limit its numbers and therefore its influence. On the other hand, the superior races, more

12 William F. Wu, *The yellow peril: Chinese Americans in American fiction, 1850–1940*, Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1982, pp. 30–46; Heinz Gollwitzer, *Die gelbe Gefahr. Geschichte eines Schlagworts. Studien zum imperialistischen Denken*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1962, pp. 29–30, 50ff., 87–91, 131ff., 175–83; and see also Arthur Herman, *The idea of decline in Western history*, New York: Free Press, 1997, pp. 173–4.

13 McKeown manuscript.

14 Bernard Gainer, *The alien invasion: the origins of the Aliens Act of 1905*, London: Heinemann, 1972, pp. 97–9, 112; Donna Gabaccia, ‘The “yellow peril” and the “Chinese of Europe”: global perspectives on race and labor, 1815–1930’, in Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen, eds., *Migration, migration history, history*, 2nd rev. ed., Bern: Peter Lang, 1999, p. 178.

15 Daniel Kevles, *In the name of eugenics: genetics and the uses of human heredity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 33; Dennis Hodgson, ‘The ideological origins of the Population Association of America’, *Population and Development Review*, 17, 1, 1991, pp. 4–5.

16 Margaret Sanger, ed., *Proceedings of the World Population Conference*, London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1927, pp. 333–4.

self-limiting than the others, with the benefits of more space and nourishment will tend to still higher levels.¹⁷

This idea of world eugenics would continue to provoke debate about global population trends for decades to come.

The spectre of population decline and the rise of demography

Even as immigration restriction succeeded in drastically reducing movement across the globe, a decline of fertility among European peoples and the anticipation that others would grow more rapidly made migration control appear inadequate. Together with the ‘dysgenic’ effects of the First World War in bringing death disproportionately to draft-eligible youths, these trends inspired an international literature. Many of these works, like Lothrop Stoddard’s *Rising tide of color*, treated the phenomenon as one affecting the white race rather than individual countries. Stoddard even provided a pull-out, color-coded map which divided the world not by political boundaries, but rather different races to indicate the ‘overcrowded colored homelands’ from whence would come the ‘outward thrust of surplus colored men’. Bertrand Russell, Oswald Spengler, and Paul Valéry also feared the decline of European peoples relative to the rise of other races.¹⁸

This concern inspired a series of population conferences, along with the first calls for international action. Thus, in 1925 Will Durant argued before the Sixth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference that, ‘to offset the so-called “yellow peril”’, the US should ‘spread Birth Control knowledge abroad so as to decrease the quantity of peoples whose unchecked reproduction threatens international peace’.¹⁹ The prominent biologist Raymond Pearl decided to forge an alliance with Margaret Sanger to promote birth control both at home and abroad: ‘It is not only desirable in the eugenic interest of the race to cut down, indeed completely extinguish, the high birth rate of the unfit and defective portions of mankind’, he argued, ‘but it is also equally desirable because of the menacing pressure of world population, to reduce the birth rate of the poor, even though that unfortunate moiety of humanity be in every way biologically sound and fit.’²⁰ In

17 Prescott Hall, ‘Immigration restriction and world eugenics’, *Journal of Heredity* 10, 3, 1919, p. 126.

18 Lothrop Stoddard, *The rising tide of color against white world-supremacy*, New York: Scribner, 1920; Bertrand Russell, *Marriage and morals*, New York: H. Liveright, 1929; Oswald Spengler, *The hour of decision*, part 1: *Germany and world-historical evolution*, Charles Francis Atkinson, trans., New York: Knopf, 1934; Paul Valéry, ‘The crisis of the mind’, in *The collected works of Paul Valéry*, Denise Folliot and Jackson Mathews, trans., vol. 10, *History and politics*, New York: Pantheon, 1962, p. 3. For a contemporary survey of this literature see A. B. Wolfe, ‘The population problem since the World War: a survey of literature and research’, *Journal of Political Economy*, 36, 5, 1928, pp. 529–59, and, more generally, Michael S. Teitelbaum and Jay M. Winter, *Fear of population decline*, Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1985.

19 Margaret Sanger Papers microfilm edition, Smith College Collections, University Publications of America, reel 2, frame 51, Will Durant, ‘Message to Sixth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference’.

20 Pearl, *The biology of population growth*, New York: Knopf, 1925, p. 171. Pearl was merely being politic in his assertion that population pressures, not biological inferiority, required reducing fertility. In his private correspondence he worried that Jews would inherit the world and argued in print that blacks had smaller brains, Elazar Barkan, *The retreat of scientific racism: changing concepts of race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 210–20.

1927 Pearl worked with Sanger to organize the first world population conference in Geneva, which brought renewed calls for birth control in Asia. Over the next decade, Sanger's London-based Birth Control International Information Centre sent supplies and advice to dozens of countries, especially India and China.

Population scientists and activists framed their concerns differently in different countries, and many still considered Europe overpopulated. But more and more were asking the same question. As the Harvard geneticist Edward M. East put it in one of the very first academic works on global population growth: 'Who shall inherit the Earth?' He explained that 'Asia as a whole is overpopulated and seeking new outlets for its hordes. Europe as a whole is overpopulated and is sending out millions of colonists. Where shall they go?'²¹

The difference between academic researchers and popularizers in this period was more a matter of style than substance, and they often mixed in these meetings.²² In the US, academics like East and the Wisconsin sociologist E. A. Ross would respectfully cite Stoddard's *Rising tide of color*, just as, in France, the sociologist Gaston Bouthoul would credit Etienne Denner's *Foules d'Asie*.²³ But both researchers and popularizers taught readers how to differentiate between 'hordes' and 'colonists', and all played on fears about population change.

As demography developed as a research field, offering theories for fertility behavior and projections of future growth and decline, it began to distance itself from the popularizers. 'Hordes' would be transformed into 'populations' and made predictable. Yet, for that very reason, the growth of demography as a science still depended partly on fear, and fear remained one of its only axioms. As the leading American demographer of the last century, Frank Notestein, later admitted: 'we did not know whether to be worried about overriding population growth or incipient population decline in the Western world. But we were quite sure that we should be worried and that, whatever the trends, changes in the biological and social heritage might well threaten the quality of the population.'²⁴

However contradictory, these fears were not random, and were not purely negative. Instead, they assumed patterns which were constructive of international order, an order that depended on recognizing the difference between hordes and colonists. This becomes all the more apparent when one realizes that such fears could arise independently of actual data, and assume a momentum all their own. For instance, in the 1920s, as the aforementioned commentators warned that the rapid growth of Asian populations imperiled the West, there was no real evidence that Asia and Africa were growing relative to the population of the European peoples. In fact, the situation was just the opposite. By 1930 their share of world population had declined to barely 60%, its lowest level in history.²⁵

21 Edward M. East, *Mankind at the crossroads*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923, pp. 96, 111–12.

22 Hodgson, 'The ideological origins of the Population Association of America', pp. 1–3.

23 East, *Mankind at the crossroads*, pp. 111–12, and, for Ross's endorsement, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Edward A. Ross Papers, microfilm edition, 1982, reel 13, frame 855, Stoddard to Ross, 5 July 1920, along with press release, June 1920, frame 843; Etienne Denner, *Foules d'Asie*, Paris: A. Colin, 1930; Gaston Bouthoul, *La population dans le monde*, Paris: Payot, 1935, pp. 70–1, 87–8.

24 Notestein, 'Memories of the early years of the Association', *Population Index*, 47, 3, 1981, p. 486.

25 Philip M. Hauser, 'World population: retrospect and prospect', *Rapid population growth: consequences and policy implications*, vol. 2, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971, p. 106.

India was the most oft-cited example of an overpopulated country, and provides a case in point. In this period Americans and Britons claimed improved public health was contributing to an overpopulation problem in India that required an international response. Cambridge economist Harold Wright insisted that in India ‘population has been increasing with disquieting rapidity owing to the removal by British rule of many of the checks to population’.²⁶ Yet between 1911 and 1921, India’s population grew from 315 to 319 million, less than a quarter of the rate of increase in Britain over the same period. Indians at the time had a life expectancy of only twenty years.²⁷

By claiming that Westerners were reducing mortality, these authors implied that they were now responsible for reducing fertility, or at the very least had both a reason and a right to continue raising barriers to immigration. Asians themselves poured scorn on these arguments. At the same Neo-Malthusian Conference where Durant warned of a ‘yellow peril’, the Indian nationalist Taraknath Das demonstrated through statistics on population growth and territorial acquisitions that ‘there is no menace of “rising tide of color” but a menace of “white peril”’.²⁸ Japanese authors often made the same point.²⁹ Even so, throughout the 1920s and ’30s American and European commentators continued to claim that they were besieged, calling for a ‘league of low birth-rate nations’, or a ‘Great Barrier of the peoples of Europe, the Americas, and Australasia against those of Africa and Asia’.³⁰ This rhetoric defined people of European descent as a single population, sharing common demographic features. In this way the West was construed as more than a geopolitical construct, but a biological reality.

Yet throwing up barriers and exporting contraceptives were not the only possible responses to the prospect that population growth in poor countries would lead to mass emigration. Warren Thompson, director of the Scripps Foundation, which was the leading American donor in population research, conceded that no civilization had ‘shown a rapacity that compares even remotely with our own’. Rather than erecting barriers to contain resource-poor but populous countries, he called for an international congress to arrange for the peaceful distribution of what he considered underused lands like New Guinea and French West Africa. He viewed this as the only alternative to the ‘force system’.³¹

In 1930 H. L. Wilkinson offered a spirited defence of the ‘White Australia’ policy. But he also argued that Australians should assist poorer, overpopulated countries, including Japan

26 Wright, *Population*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923, p. 66; and see also Stoddard, *The rising tide of color*; East, *Mankind at the crossroads*, pp. 88–90; Ross, *Standing room only?*, New York: Century, 1927, pp. 295–6.

27 Kingsley Davis, *The population of India and Pakistan*, New York: Russell & Russell, 1951, 1968, pp. 35–6. The tone of official reports on public health in this period is apologetic rather than celebratory, see, for instance, British Library, London, India Office Records, V/24/3659, ‘Annual Report of the Public Health Commissioner with the Government of India’ for the years 1921, pp. 61–5, 1924, pp. 1–3, and 1926, pp. 207–11.

28 Das, ‘The population problem in India’, in Margaret Sanger, ed., *Religious and ethical aspects of birth control*, New York: American Birth Control League, 1926, pp. 195–8.

29 Cemil Aydin book manuscript on the politics of anti-Westernism in Asia, forthcoming from Columbia University Press.

30 Harold Cox, *The problem of population*, New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1923, p. 85; Ross, *Standing room only?*, pp. 93–8, 341.

31 Warren S. Thompson, *Danger spots in world population*, New York: Knopf, 1929, p. 6 and passim.

and Italy, through such means as preferential tariffs. Wilkinson considered this ‘a logical extension of the “White Australia” policy and the logical sequence of restricting immigration’.³² Yet that same year Robert Kuczynski, a German emigré who had pioneered methods of projecting future population growth, suggested the logical sequence might be quite different. The Earth might support as many as 11 billion people, but only if they had absolute freedom to cross borders. The US, for instance, ‘would have to open her gates to all nations of the world ... she would have to welcome a hundred million or more foreign immigrants without the slightest discrimination on account of color, race, standard of living, etc.’. Inhabitants of overcrowded areas ‘will have to claim the right of occupation’. Efforts to uphold immigration barriers would only lead to war.³³

In 1935 Gaston Bouthoul observed that ‘the question of Asiatic emigration is laden with the seeds of conflict’ and suggested the need for a *population dirigée* – or controlled population – to ensure harmony within and between nations. But he also cautioned that, when people were feeling crowded within their own borders and – in the case of Germany – depriving whole categories of their compatriots the means of existence, such a policy would require ‘almost superhuman’ foresight and justice if it was not to serve as a pretext for genocide.³⁴ What all of these authors had in common was a belief that narrow definitions of national interest and a strict defence of state sovereignty would stand in the way of addressing population problems – indeed, might even bring on a new world war.

One might question the seriousness of Kuczynski’s speculations, and perhaps view the cession of undeveloped territories and dismantling of tariffs for nations that were pressing for much more as mere accommodations to what Thompson called the ‘force system’. The first president of the Population Association of America, Henry Pratt Fairchild, probably represented the majority of its members when he called for the ‘complete elimination from international law and international thought of any recognition of migration as a potential remedy for population evils’.³⁵ But the very stridency of this response indicates that these were not just idle musings of a few specialists. In the 1927 world population conference in Geneva, the director of the International Labor Office, Albert Thomas, suggested establishing a ‘supreme supernational authority which would regulate the distribution of population on rational and impartial lines, by controlling and directing migration movements and deciding on the opening-up or closing of countries to particular streams of immigration’.³⁶

Most League of Nations officials remained wary of involving themselves in population controversies – whether calls for promotion of birth control, or claims that overpopulated

32 *The world’s population problems and a White Australia*, London: P.S. King & Son, 1930, pp. 316–17.

33 ‘The world’s future population’, in Corrado Gini, *et al.*, eds., *Population (Lectures on the Harris Foundation)*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1930, pp. 286–8; Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and degeneration: eugenics and the declining birthrate in twentieth-century Britain*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990, p. 234.

34 Bouthoul, *La population*, pp. 81, 249–52.

35 Fairchild, *Immigration: a world movement and its American significance*, New York: Macmillan, 1926, p. 500.

36 Thomas, ‘International migration and its control’, in Margaret Sanger, ed., *Proceedings of the World Population Conference*, London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1927, pp. 257–65.

states had a right to *lebensraum*.³⁷ They could only be approached obliquely, such as in proposals for ‘economic appeasement’ through reducing tariff barriers on foodstuffs and raising nutritional standards. In one of the most influential statements, the Australian economist F. L. McDougall underlined the importance of improving nutrition for what he called ‘the young human breeding stock of the advanced countries’ as a way to reduce the number of ‘C-3’ defectives.³⁸ Thus, issues of political economy and population ‘quality’ remained intertwined.

Population growth and great power conflict

The Second World War brought even more urgent attention to the question of ‘who shall inherit the Earth’, and the possibility that demographic trends might ultimately determine the answer. By this point new data indicated that mortality was indeed declining in high-fertility, rural societies such as India, Ceylon, Egypt, Algeria, Taiwan, and the Philippines.³⁹ Yet Japan’s early victories and plans to unite Asia were initially far more important in re-igniting anxieties about whether Westerners could continue to exercise power disproportionate to their numbers. Even Hitler grew worried upon hearing of the fall of Singapore, reportedly suggesting that ‘he would gladly send the English twenty divisions to help throw back the yellow men’.⁴⁰ This same concern informed Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s interest in accelerating decolonization, which he saw as a way to appease ‘1,100,000,000 potential enemies’.⁴¹

Though the policy responses these fears elicited were quite different, the fears themselves assumed strikingly similar forms, revealing how the ‘yellow peril’ discourse continued to shape the way people imagined population trends and their political consequences. Thus, even liberals like Pearl Buck played on anxieties about a future race war in arguing for the repeal of discriminatory immigration policies against America’s Chinese allies.⁴² Aldous Huxley warned that ‘military leaders of the countries with low birth-rates will come to believe that their only chance of survival consists in using, before it is too late, their technical superiority in atomic and biological weapons, in order to offset the effect of the big battalions’.⁴³ The ultimate fear was that these large populations would gain access to

37 For an exception that proved the rule – in which League guidelines on maternal health were withdrawn because they mentioned birth control – see World Health Organization Archives, Geneva, League Archives, 1928–1932, section 8A, 5638, and League Archives, 1933–1946, section 8f, 2363/895.

38 Amy Staples, ‘Constructing international identity: the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization, and World Health Organization, 1945–1965’, PhD thesis, Ohio State University, 1998, pp. 168–9, 176–8; Food and Agriculture Organization Archives, Rome, RG 3.1, Series D1, ‘Notes and comments by Mr. F. L. McDougall’, ‘The agricultural and the health problems’, 1934.

39 A. M. Carr-Saunders, *World population: past growth and present trends*, London: Frank Cass, 1936.

40 Milan Hauner, ‘Did Hitler want a world dominion?’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 13, 1, 1978, p. 25.

41 Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: origins and legacy of a war*, Boston: Twayne, 1990, p. 29. See also Christopher Thorne, *Allies of a kind: the United States, Britain and the war against Japan, 1941–1945*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 7–9, 191.

42 Dower, *War without mercy*, p. 160.

43 Aldous Huxley, ‘The double crisis: part I’, *World Review*, November 1948, p. 14.

advanced technology – recalling another theme in the yellow peril genre. As the Princeton demographer Dudley Kirk explained in 1944:

Increase of population, and the very mass of the Asiatic population itself, could be ignored in the past as unimportant in the balance of world power. But with the prospect that the Asiatic masses will ultimately learn to forge the tools that will give them power, the differential population trends may become of very great importance.⁴⁴

While Kirk predicted that this would bring the decline of European peoples relative to the rest of the world, he too warned that any attempt to preserve ‘white supremacy’ would cause ‘an intercontinental war that might well dwarf the present conflict in ferocity’. In particular, he and his colleagues at Princeton’s Office of Population Research – the first of many such centres – criticized the colonial powers for keeping their possessions in a backward state. They endorsed both decolonization and comprehensive development assistance.⁴⁵

One reason for this apparent altruism was that Notestein, Kirk, and another Princeton demographer, Kingsley Davis, were convinced that only urbanization, industrialization, and the resulting increase in demand for contraception would reduce fertility rates – and fertility differentials – worldwide. This idea of the ‘demographic transition’ was demography’s contribution to development theory, which emphasized rising literacy rates and new media in raising expectations. Shrinking relative to the rest of the world seemed less threatening if the rest merely aspired to become more like the West. Davis, who was the first to liken population growth to an ‘explosion’, acknowledged that the ‘possibility that Asia’s teeming millions will double or even triple within the next few decades . . . appears as a Frankenstein appalling to many observers’. But he argued that ‘the Asiatic *races* [are not] going to cause the whole world to ‘sink’ to the level of present-day Oriental civilization’ because it would ‘pass irretrievably as the Asiatic peoples become Westernized’.⁴⁶ The new science of demography, in other words, could slay monsters, or at least domesticate them.

Yet the authors of demographic transition theory knew it was only a theory, and worried that poor countries would not make the transition fast enough – especially at a time in which Communism was on the march.⁴⁷ In a 1952 meeting called by John D. Rockefeller 3rd to establish the Population Council – which would become the pre-eminent centre for applied research – Davis warned that ‘the advanced countries, the places where the scientific developments are being made, are beginning to be leveled down by the tremendous demands of the rest of the world for sheer subsistence, at low levels of living’. Frederick Osborn, who would become president of the Population Council, observed that technological development required not just high intelligence, but ‘freedom of the human mind’, and

44 Dudley Kirk, ‘Population changes and the postwar world’, *American Sociological Review*, 9, 1, 1944, p. 35.

45 *Ibid.*; Hodgson, ‘Orthodoxy and revisionism’, pp. 550–1.

46 Davis ‘The world demographic transition’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 237, January 1945, pp. 1, 7–8, (emphasis in original); Susan Greenhalgh, ‘The social construction of population science: an intellectual, institutional, and political history of twentieth-century demography’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 38, 1, 1996, pp. 37–8.

47 Simon Szreter stresses – more than this author – the importance of the Cold War in this intellectual history, see ‘The idea of demographic transition and the study of fertility change: a critical intellectual history’, *Population and Development Review*, 19, 4, 1993, pp. 670–4.

this was difficult to preserve in situations of high mortality and high fertility. Even in the era of modernization theory, the level of subsistence was sometimes construed to be culturally specific, and gross disparities threatened prospects for development worldwide.⁴⁸

All of those present were acutely aware that, as a Rockefeller Foundation official put it, theirs was ‘the point of view of Western Protestant philosophy, and that is from the point of view of this planet, a minority point of view.’ In 1956 a Population Council policy committee issued a stark warning:

What could be more dangerous material for anti-American propaganda than the idea that rich, white Americans want to restrict the growth of colored Asian and African peoples (a) because of their own decadence (reflected in their low birthrate) they fear the rising tide of colored people, and (b) because having prodigally wasted their own rich resources they want to conserve the remaining resources of the world for their own use.⁴⁹

Over the following decade non-governmental organizations like the Council along with the Ford Foundation and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) promoted fertility control programs in poor countries. But their preferred method was to cultivate local constituencies by endowing research centres, providing training, and promoting graduates to positions of leadership.

US government officials were reluctant even to comment on population problems in this period, but not because of a lack of interest. Dwight Eisenhower’s greatest nightmare was that the Soviets would succeed in uniting the countries of Asia and Africa against the West, and he kept score by counting population.⁵⁰ In 1960 he presented his foreign aid proposals by describing Soviet and Chinese communists as engaged in a ‘fantastic conspiracy’ that had seized a third of the world’s population.⁵¹ At other times he left the Soviets out and grouped together what he called ‘the one and a half billion hungry people in the world’. He admitted to his National Security Council that the ‘menace’ posed by population growth in poor countries was ‘a constant worry to him and from time to time reduced him to despair’.⁵² Lyndon Johnson was even more pessimistic, imagining that the US was utterly isolated. ‘There are 3 billion people in the world and we have only 200 million of them’, he told troops guarding the Korean demilitarized zone in 1966. ‘We are outnumbered 15 to 1. If might did make right they would sweep over the United States and take what we have.’⁵³

48 Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, NY (henceforth RAC), RG 5, John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers, Series 1, Sub-series 5, box 85, folders 720–3, ‘National Academy of Sciences: Conference on Population Problems’, 20–22 June 1952.

49 *Ibid.*; Ford Foundation Archives, New York, NY, 1953 Grant Files, PA 54–20, ‘The Population Council’, ‘Summary of the Proceedings of the Ad Hoc Committee’, 11 April 1956.

50 Stephen G. Rabe, *Eisenhower and Latin America*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988, p. 139. See also John Lewis Gaddis, *We now know: rethinking Cold War history*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, pp. 152–3.

51 Buton I. Kaufman, *Trade and aid: Eisenhower’s foreign economic policy 1953–1961*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, p. 169.

52 Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas, Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, 408th and 417th meetings of the National Security Council, 28 May and 18 August 1959.

53 ‘Remarks to American and Korean servicemen at Camp Stanley’, 1 November 1966, *Public papers of the presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson*, 1966, book 2, p. 1287.

The fear of international race or class war sometimes seemed so compelling as to transcend the Cold War. In 1959, speaking of the USSR, Charles de Gaulle assured reporters that ‘nothing can change the fact that she is Russia, a white nation of Europe which has conquered part of Asia, and is, in sum, richly endowed with land, mines, factories and wealth’. By virtue of their position, the French president was certain that Russia’s leaders would recognize their common foe: ‘the yellow masses of China, numberless and impoverished, indestructible and ambitious, building through trial and hardship a power that cannot be measured and casting her eyes about her on the open spaces over which she must one day spread.’⁵⁴ Even in the US, the Soviets were sometimes grouped among the developed nations as potential allies in a world in which European peoples might become a persecuted minority. For World Bank President George Woods, it was not East–West rivalry but growing economic and demographic disparities which constituted ‘the most ominous force that divides us today’.⁵⁵

State sovereignty in a small world

If, for some world leaders, accelerating population growth and persistent fertility differentials appeared to have the potential to recast international alignments, others went further still. Researchers asked whether demographic trends might actually revolutionize the very nature of international relations. We have already seen how, in the 1930s, differential population growth led demographers to ask whether absolute state sovereignty was becoming outmoded. In succeeding years this tendency was strengthened by the accelerating pace of decolonization as well as a series of technological developments, especially the collection and analysis of demographic data, the increasingly obvious environmental effects of mass production and consumption, and the proliferation of new means of communications.

The first of these is perhaps the most prosaic, but in 1946 the great majority of the population of Asia and Africa had not been counted for at least a quarter of a century.⁵⁶ Under Notestein’s leadership the UN’s population division successfully promoted national censuses with standardized procedures in almost all the newly independent states. The UN collected this data and published under its imprimatur annual estimates of present and future world population.⁵⁷ Notestein later explained that gathering data was politically safer than promoting birth control – a 1952 World Health Organization proposal nearly provoked several Catholic member states to withdraw.⁵⁸ But better data were also a prerequisite for the

54 Charles de Gaulle, *Discours et messages: Avec le renouveau, Mai 1958–Juillet 1962*, Paris: Plon, 1970, p. 130.

55 Columbia University, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, George D. Woods Papers, box 22, ‘Development – the need for new directions’, 27 October 1967.

56 John Cleland, ‘Demographic data collection in less developed countries’, *Population Studies*, 50, 3, 1996, pp. 433–6.

57 Frank W. Notestein, ‘Demography in the United States: a partial account of the development of the field’, *Population and Development Review*, 8, 4, 1982, p. 668.

58 World Health Organization, Official Records, no. 42, Geneva, World Health Organization, 1952, pp. 232–40.

development of any international population policies. When these early projections proved understated, population control appeared all the more urgent.⁵⁹

As recent histories of how states use demographic statistics have shown, they are never value neutral.⁶⁰ The very categories imply collective interests, as shown by the difficulties ethnically-divided states have in conducting censuses.⁶¹ Alternatively, a successful census constitutes a nationalist ritual, culminating in a ‘group snapshot’ on the ceremony date.⁶² When figures on ‘world population’ and its projected growth were used in arguments for population limitation, they were instrumental in the assertion of global norms.

The political utility of counting and projecting the world’s population becomes obvious when, for instance, the UN awards a silver peace medal to a Bosnian Muslim couple in Sarajevo deemed to be the parents of the world’s ‘six billionth person’.⁶³ But it was recognized and opposed even before it began by contemporary critics like the famed French demographer Alfred Sauvy. In 1949 he insisted that there was no such thing as a ‘world population’ – as opposed to a French population or a Japanese population – because there was no world government or even the requisite sense of solidarity that might produce it. If such solidarity were to develop, Sauvy worried it might ‘lead to a closer examination of the distribution of land among peoples’. This would ‘favor the birth of a new international legal order; less aggressive, no doubt, than the Hitlerite doctrine of *Lebensraum*, yet one dangerously breaking with the past’.⁶⁴

Most contemporaries who considered the question concluded that it was impossible not to consider the Earth as a whole precisely because there was no longer any free living space. Among them was the great mathematician John Von Neumann. In a 1955 article, ‘Can we survive technology?’, he warned that ‘The great globe itself’ was in crisis. ‘[L]iterally and figuratively,’ he explained, ‘we are running out of room. At long last, we begin to feel the effects of the finite, actual size of the Earth in a critical way.’⁶⁵ While the speed and power of nuclear weapons provided the most dramatic and obvious reasons, Von Neumann also pointed to global warming as well as ‘the newly achieved political effectiveness of non-European nationalisms’. He predicted that together such trends would ‘merge each nation’s

59 John and Pat Caldwell, *Limiting population growth and the Ford Foundation contribution*, London, Frances Pinter, 1986, pp. 2, 22–5.

60 Yankel Fijalkow, ‘Hygiene, population sciences and population policy: a totalitarian menace?’, *Contemporary European History*, 8, 3, 1999, pp. 451–72.

61 Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic groups in conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 83–7, 326–30; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*, rev. ed., London: Verso, 1991, pp. 164–70.

62 William Kruskal quoted in Nathan Keyfitz, ‘The social and political context of population forecasting’, in William Alonso and Paul Starr, eds., *The politics of numbers*, New York: William Sage Foundation, 1987, pp. 238–9.

63 Katherine Butler, ‘Bosnian hailed as the six billionth person in world’, *The Independent*, 13 October 1999. It was later revealed that the family was squatting in an apartment from which a Bosnian Serb had been forced to flee, and were threatened with eviction, Paul Watson, ‘6 billionth baby virtually homeless’, *The Toronto Star*, 2 August 2000.

64 Sauvy, ‘Le “faux problème” de la population mondiale’, originally published in *Population*, 4, 3, 1949, pp. 447–62, reprinted in *Population and Development Review*, 16, 4, 1990, pp. 759–74. See also Paul Demeny, ‘Demography and the limits to growth’, p. 225.

65 ‘Can we survive technology?’, *Fortune*, June 1955, is reprinted in *Population and Development Review*, 12, 1, 1986, p. 118.

affairs with those of every other, more thoroughly than the threat of a nuclear or any other war may already have done'.⁶⁶

It is well known that the threat of nuclear war led many to conclude that world government offered the only hope for humanity's long-term survival.⁶⁷ But population growth's potential to outstrip the Earth's carrying capacity also contributed to a gathering sense that sovereignty stood in the way of solving the most pressing world problems. Two years later, in a classic article, the political scientist John H. Herz concluded that the realization that 'we are inhabitants of a planet of limited (and, it now seems, insufficient) size' could help drive positive change:

if we add to this the universal interest in the common solution of other great world problems, such as those posed by the population-resources dilemma (exhaustion of vital resources with the 'population explosion' throughout the world) . . . it is perhaps not entirely utopian to expect the ultimate spread of an attitude of 'universalism' through which a rational approach to world problems would at last become possible.⁶⁸

Even though Herz put it between quotation marks, this image of population growth as explosive was increasingly common. It was often linked to the spread of mass communications, especially through film, transistor radios, and rising literacy rates, which increased awareness of radically different standards of living. Sauvy worried that Europeans' fear and distress that redistribution might become necessary reduced their will to reproduce. This recalled M. J. Dee's argument seventy years earlier, only now it was applied not to rival immigrant communities, but countries and continents. Three years later, Sauvy wrote that the cries of misery from across the Mediterranean could already be heard in the Cote d'Azur. He coined the term 'third world' to connote this global third estate and imply that revolution was in the air.⁶⁹

Sauvy opposed efforts to promote population control, fearing it only depressed fertility among the affluent and might provoke a backlash in poor countries. But others issued increasingly dire predictions and demanded action. In 1960, thirty-nine Nobel laureates joined in warning that 'there is in prospect a Dark Age of human misery, famine, under-education and unrest which could generate growing panic, exploding into wars fought to appropriate the dwindling means of survival'.⁷⁰ It was not just the rate of growth that made population seem explosive. New technologies, and especially new means of mass communications, had created a global consciousness. But many Western observers thought that the most common sentiment for the bulk of the world's population would be 'envy and

66 *Ibid.*, pp. 119–23. See also the proceedings of the landmark conference in Princeton held the same month von Neumann's article appeared, William L. Thomas, *et al.*, eds., *Man's role in changing the face of the Earth*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1956, especially E. A. Gutkind, 'One world from the air: conflict and adaptation', pp. 1–44.

67 Paul Boyer, *By the bomb's early light: American thought and culture at the dawn of the atomic age*, New York: Pantheon, 1985, pp. 33–45.

68 Herz, 'Rise and demise of the territorial state', *World Politics*, 9, 4, 1957, pp. 492–3.

69 Sauvy, 'Le "faux problème"', p. 765; 'Trois mondes, une planète', *L'Observateur*, p. 118, 14 August 1952, reprinted in Michel Louis Lévy, *Alfred Sauvy: compagnon du siècle*, Paris: La Manufacture, 1990, p. 181.

70 US National Archives, College Park, MD (henceforth USNA), RG 59, Central Decimal Files, 800.401, 'Statement of conviction', circa November 1960.

revolt' – as Kingsley Davis told *Foreign Affairs* readers – which might bring a collapse of the *social* distance between wealthy and poor people.⁷¹

Yet in the 1960s it remained difficult to explain how, exactly, poverty and population growth threatened anyone but its victims. Analysts warned of spreading anarchy, but struggled to describe how it might actually appear. 'Are we really liable to have a breakdown in law and order in some of the large metropolitan areas in the poorer countries?' asked William Clark, director of the Overseas Development Institute. 'This would involve some very strange changes in the present power structure.'⁷² Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau warned vaguely that growing populations of the poor would create 'pressures' on the rich to 'make decisions of frightening moral consequence'. He quoted Chateaubriand's observation that a poor man would not tolerate gross inequality once he became aware of its magnitude: 'in the last result you would have to kill him'.⁷³

Those seeking support for campaigns to control world population continually pointed to the future because they could not actually prove that it had caused any particular crisis or emergency, as most people understood these terms. Seeking vivid images, authors and publicists tried out different techniques to make population growth seem more 'explosive'. The Caltech Geochemist Harrison Brown happened upon one solution when he asked an audience to imagine what would happen if it continued to accelerate. Eventually, people would not only cover the entire planet, but would form a 'sphere of humanity' expanding at the speed of light.⁷⁴

Such devices demanded an extremely long-range perspective – 5,300 years, in this case. In the meantime, how would wealthy Americans and Europeans, who were asked to pay for population control programs, actually be affected if poor people continued to have large families? An alternative technique was to present the problem of overpopulation both at home and abroad in the most personal terms possible. This approach was made notorious in a full-page appeal the 'Campaign to Check the Population Explosion' that ran in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in March 1968. With an out-of-focus shot of an elderly man throttled by a young attacker, it asked readers, 'Have you ever been mugged? Well, you may be!' The text linked population growth to crime, pollution, and deteriorating quality of life. 'We can be an effective agency', one of campaign's backers explained, 'if we can provoke concern, if we can raise the dead, if we can instill the dread of crimes, whether they be in the United States or in Vietnam. There is only one hope for the world, and that is to get those in power running scared.'⁷⁵

Yet to represent population growth in such a way risked arousing suspicions that it was above all a problem for a few frightened and privileged people. The leaders of Planned Parenthood repudiated the advertisement for 'its utter lack of humanity, its fallacious single focus on the poor, and its implied pleas for coercive

71 Kingsley Davis, 'The political impact of new population trends', *Foreign Affairs*, 36, 2, 1958, p. 296.

72 National Archives, Kew, UK, FO 953/2496, William Clark to John Nicholls, 21 February 1966.

73 USNA, RG 59, Central Files, 1970–1973, Soc 13-3, box 3037, Claxton to Rogers, 15 July 1971.

74 William Vogt, *People! Challenge to survival*, New York: William Sloan Associates, 1960, pp. 50–1.

75 Donald T. Critchlow, *Intended consequences: birth control, abortion, and the federal government in modern America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 151–2.

control'.⁷⁶ An international movement had to be inclusive, even if 'most of our money comes from what are popularly known as WASPS' – as a senior IPPF official admitted – many worried about the relative increase of poor, non-WASPS worldwide.⁷⁷

Exploding the population bomb

Shortly afterward, Paul Ehrlich showed how it was more effective to play on such anxieties without actually naming them. A Stanford entomologist, he wrote the all-time best-selling book on population on commission from the Sierra Club.⁷⁸ By 1974, it had gone through twenty-two printings and sold two million copies. Over thirty thousand people joined a new pressure group, Zero Population Growth, under Ehrlich's leadership. Senators and congressmen cited his book when demanding government action.⁷⁹ Why did it have such an impact?

The population bomb begins by describing how Ehrlich and his family once found themselves riding a flea-ridden taxi on a 'stinking hot night in Delhi'.

As we crawled through the city, we entered a crowded slum area ... the streets seemed alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping. People visiting, arguing, and screaming. People thrusting their hands through the taxi window, begging. People defecating and urinating ... People, people, people, people.

Ehrlich wrote that he had understood the problem of population growth intellectually, but now he could 'understand it emotionally'. For the first time he had experienced 'the *feel* of overpopulation'.⁸⁰

This reaction to an encounter with crowds of poor people might seem idiosyncratic if it had not also occurred to so many other travelers in India. For instance, during a trip to Calcutta Claude Lévi-Strauss reacted in much the same terms to what he described as 'the herding together of individuals whose only reason for living is to herd together in millions, whatever the conditions of life may be. Filth, chaos, promiscuity, congestion; ruins, huts, mud, dirt; dung, urine, pus, humous, secretions and running sores'. The biologist Julian Huxley, the first director-general of UNESCO, also recoiled from the 'human ant-heap' he found along the Ganges: 'a crowd of this size makes a frightening and elemental impression', he admitted, 'it seems so impersonal and uncontrollable'.⁸¹ Like the earliest writers on

76 Association for Voluntary Sterilization Papers, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Elmer L. Andersen Library, SW 15.1, box 26, 'Planned Parenthood', Planned Parenthood statement, 14 March 1968.

77 IPPF Archives, London, 1.4.1.1.3, 'IPPF Management and Planning Committee', Eighth Meeting of the Management and Planning Committee, 23 September 1966.

78 *The population bomb*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1968.

79 Paul and Anne Ehrlich Papers, Stanford University Archives, SC 223, Series 6, folder 52, Betty Ballantine to Ehrlich, 1 May 1968, and Ballantine Books press release 15 January 1970. For correspondence from legislators see folders 57–8.

80 *The population bomb*, pp. 15–16 (emphasis in original).

81 Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, John and Doreen Weightman, trans., New York: Modern Library, 1955, 1997, pp. 146–7; Julian Huxley, 'World population', *Scientific American*, March 1956, pp. 68–9. The layout of Indian cities, with narrow paths following irregular patterns, had long made them appear overcrowded – British visitors had the same impression more than a century earlier, Bernard S. Cohn, *An anthropologist among historians and other essays*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 234–5.

the ‘yellow peril’, these authors suggested overpopulation led to the loss of individuality, and even humanity. And they conveyed a sensation of both fear and disgust to communicate the danger of degeneration and collapsing social distance.

Ehrlich could have encountered even larger crowds on a hot night in New York or London, as Mahmood Mamdani pointed out. What evidently disturbed him was not their numbers, but their quality – i.e. their race and poverty.⁸² In fact, Ehrlich probably connected precisely with those readers who had imagined getting lost in a large city and ending up in the wrong neighbourhood – not in Delhi, but in the South Bronx or Brixton. Only Ehrlich invited readers not just to imagine a wrong turn, but to picture America – all of it – turning into a bad neighbourhood. Thus, every time in the following pages he described population growth in poor countries he called on readers to imagine what it would mean for America. How, for instance, could the US manage if 200 million people were ‘dumped’ on it in thirteen years, as he said would occur in India.⁸³ This was a recurrent theme in Sierra Club publications. A 1960 photo book titled *This is the American Earth* featured many idyllic images of pristine landscapes across North America. But it also included, rather incongruously, a two-page spread depicting a crowd of Indians bathing in the Ganges, along with a distraught mother clutching her baby under the label ‘famine’.⁸⁴

About a million more – and more diverse – people would arrive in the US the year *The population bomb* was published, and each of the following years, as the exclusionary national-origins principle in US immigration law was finally abolished.⁸⁵ Population growth was already being blamed for deteriorating schools and cities and the rise in crime rates. *The population bomb* first appeared only a few months after the Kerner commission report on civil unrest in Detroit and Newark, and just before what many feared would be another long, hot summer. Parallels were often drawn between the breakdown of ‘law and order’ in America’s increasingly multiracial cities and the failure of the counter-insurgency campaign in Vietnam.⁸⁶ And Ehrlich pointed out that, just as satellite TV brought the sight of wounded American soldiers into their living rooms, it would soon bring scenes of starving children. Because, he declared, ‘The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970’s the world will undergo famines – hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked on now.’⁸⁷

So when Ehrlich finally suggested that population growth would disturb more than his readers’ consciences, that indeed poor people were likely to ‘attempt to overwhelm us in order to get what they consider to be their fair share’, they would have been ready for

82 *The myth of population control: family, caste, and class in an Indian village*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972, pp. 1–2.

83 *Population bomb*, pp. 22–3, 37, 40.

84 Thomas Robertson, ‘This is the American Earth: American empire and American environmentalism’, unpublished paper for Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis seminar, New Brunswick, NJ, 15 November 2005, pp. 1, 22; Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall, *This is the American Earth*, San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1960.

85 Alexander DeConde, *Ethnicity, race, and American foreign policy: a history*, Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1992, pp. 141–2, 157–9.

86 Michael Flamm, *Law and order: street crime, civil unrest, and the crisis of liberalism in the 1960s*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 105–15.

87 *Population bomb*, prologue and p. 132.

drastic solutions both at home and abroad. Ehrlich proposed that the US together with the USSR and other developed states cut off food aid to areas that were beyond help. Elsewhere they should create a ‘machinery’ for ‘area development’. He used the word area because, rather than denying or developing them individually, poor countries would be ‘divided or even rearranged’ so as to draw boundaries around the most viable areas. Within them the first step would be to provide transistor televisions for communal viewing, which would communicate a warning that food aid depended on their cooperation. The very bedrock of that cooperation, Ehrlich wrote, would be ‘population control’.⁸⁸

Originally development theory was premised on the idea that Asians and Africans would imagine themselves as Westerners and work toward that status. But Ehrlich turned the tables. Americans were asked to imagine themselves as part of a poor, overcrowded society – indeed, imagine the US as overpopulated with underdeveloped people. In this way, he showed them how and why they could and should shut them out, whether the threat came from poor countries or from America’s own urban centres.

In 1968 Congressional pressure led to a rapid increase in US funding for population control, to the point that it comprised fully two-thirds of international assistance in the field. At the same time, the US helped create a UN Fund for Population Activities able to operate all over the world. Historians have pointed to an array of technological, cultural, and political factors to explain why. The development of the IUD and the Pill had finally provided a technological ‘fix’ for the longstanding concern that population growth and poverty provided fertile ground for communist influence. Though originally developed with an eye to limiting population growth in poor countries, they were quickly taken up by women in the US and Europe. The campaign for expanding reproductive rights along with the nascent environmentalist movement created powerful new constituencies for supplying contraception abroad.⁸⁹

Yet considering the popularity of a work like *The population bomb*, and the persistence of similar fears in the century that preceded it, one cannot but conclude that there was a powerful emotive aspect to the international politics of population. Even those who argued for reproductive rights and health – rather than population control – sometimes drew from and contributed to the same discursive tradition. Thus, when John D. Rockefeller 3rd’s top advisor, Joan Dunlop, traveled to Bangladesh, she too recoiled from people who appeared both alien and lacking in individuality, only the crowd was defined by gender and not just racial or cultural difference:

As a Western woman, one cannot visit a Moslem country, particularly of the density of the sub-continent, and not feel that population is a problem of masculinity. I do not mean to be ideological – it’s just a fact. All these people are men. Men run the country, the villages, the

88 *Population bomb*, pp. 133, 158–66.

89 Critchlow, *Intended consequences*; Peter J. Donaldson, *Nature against us: the United States and the world population crisis, 1965–1980*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990; John Sharpless, ‘Population science, private foundations, and development aid: the transformation of demographic knowledge in the United States, 1945–1965’, in Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard, eds., *International development and the social sciences*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, pp. 176–200, and ‘World population growth, family planning, and American foreign policy’, *Journal of Policy History*, 7, 1, 1995, pp. 72–102.

store, the community, the family. In my more irritated moments, I found myself muttering through clenched teeth ‘male futility and male fertility’.⁹⁰

Ehrlich’s vision was not, therefore, the logical endpoint in some teleological process. Instead, it formed part of a discursive tradition that continues to shape how people perceive and report population problems, even if they come to different conclusions. In fact, Ehrlich himself, disturbed at the way some were reading his work, announced that population control was most urgent for wealthy, white Americans, since they consumed the most resources.⁹¹ To radical ecologists, all of humanity came to appear like the ‘cancer of the planet’. Thus, even if, like Malthus, one imagined ‘a world already possessed’ as a great hall in which too many people sought places at ‘nature’s mighty feast’ – or famine – the tables could turn and turn again.

A preoccupation with population trends does not, therefore, inevitably lead to a certain view of the world. Rather, it provided both a motive and a means to ‘think globally’ in many different ways. But a close reading of language and imagery reveals that there were and are patterns in the process. The power and pervasiveness of a particular discursive tradition dating to the yellow peril literature continues to be apparent in more recent prophecies such as Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of civilizations’, Robert Kaplan’s ‘Coming anarchy’, and Niall Ferguson’s ‘Eurabia’,⁹² which share the same themes, images, and metaphors. Even at their most fanciful and far-fetched, fears about who will inherit the Earth tend to assume not just particular forms, but particular directions. One of the most interesting is the way in which they have contributed to critiques of state sovereignty. While population was traditionally seen as a source of state power, its growth and movement in a period in which technological developments collapsed spatial distance appeared to imperil state autonomy and authority. This sometimes elicited a defensive response, but calls for Western or white solidarity implicitly conceded that it would necessarily be transnational or would at least require rethinking diplomatic alignments. Some of the same racial anxieties inspired others to advocate policies that would have accepted and even accelerated the relative decline of European peoples as part of a more peaceful and orderly system of world governance. This was sometimes cast in utopian terms, but in other cases, like Ehrlich’s *Population bomb*, global norms and institutions to control population growth were thought to be necessarily coercive.

It is not altogether surprising that population growth led people to reconsider whether sovereignty can or should serve as an organizing principle of international politics. After all, its three determinants, fertility, mortality, and migration, are all historically and conceptually prior to the state system. But it was only in this period that techniques were developed to measure demographic trends and manipulate population outcomes in a systematic and

90 RAC, RG IV3B4.2, Population Council, Acc. II, George Zeidenstein, box 3, ‘Personal and confidential’ file on trip to Pakistan and Bangladesh, Dunlop to John D. Rockefeller 3rd, 7 April 1976.

91 Paul and Anne Ehrlich, ‘Population control and genocide’, in John P. Holdren and Paul R. Ehrlich, eds., *Global ecology: readings toward a rational strategy for Man*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971, pp. 157–8.

92 Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, pp. 307, 316; Kaplan, ‘The coming anarchy’, *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994, p. 48; Ferguson, ‘Eurabia?’, *New York Times*, 4 April 2004.

predictable fashion. This presented both dangers and opportunities. Recognizing the political nature of reproduction provided a way to reify – even ‘improve’ – the nation. But it could also reproduce social formations in radically different ways by promoting identities that transcended or undermined official nationalisms. These identities could be based not only on race, class, and gender, but also on a sense of shared humanity, or even of shared community with all other inhabitants of the planet. The nature and purpose of these projects can be coercive, liberating, and sometimes both at the same time. But they will always have the potential to change the way people think about the world and their place in it.

*Matthew Connelly is an associate professor of history
at Columbia University.*

