

Diminishing support for Ehrlich

A comparison of American opinion of the ideas presented in *The Population Bomb* and *The Population Explosion*, with reference to China's one-child policy and India's compulsory sterilisation programme

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Introduction

Published in 1968, Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* begins with anecdotal evidence of overpopulation in Delhi, India.¹ The author's use of vivid, visceral language sets the scene for a book with a remarkably alarmist tone, in which he uses the case of India and later China to outline grave fears of mass starvation, and then gives suggestions for how the problem should be addressed. In the prologue of the book, he writes: "we must have population control at home, hopefully through a system of incentives and penalties, but by compulsion if voluntary methods fail . . . the birth rate must be brought into balance with the death rate or mankind will breed itself into oblivion". In 1976, just 8 years after the book's publication, India introduced a compulsory sterilisation programme as a means of population control, and 2 years later China, the most populous country on Earth, began its radical one-child policy.²³ Both of these government interventions would appear to be clear examples of the solutions Ehrlich was suggesting in *The*

¹Ehrlich 1971, p. 1.

²Dauvergne 2009, p. 60.

³Central Intelligence Agency 2015.

Population Bomb, and they are reviewed in Ehrlich's later book, *The Population Explosion*, published in 1990.⁴ The following discussion aims to compare Ehrlich's views on these two case studies with the general opinion of the American population, arguing that in contrast to the relatively popular ideas proposed by Ehrlich in *The Population Bomb*, by the publication of *The Population Explosion* in 1990, support for Ehrlich's position was scarce.

The Population Bomb

Though not Ehrlich's first publication, *The Population Bomb* was the first to be highly influential, selling over two million copies and propelling its author to a status of environmentalist stardom. Inspired by the surge in support and interest, Ehrlich cofounded the Zero Population Growth organisation in the wake of the book's publication, which gained more than 30,000 members under his leadership and continues to aim to educate the public in the urgent need for population control.⁵

A key literary feature of *The Population Bomb* is its repeated use of example case studies and seemingly predictive scenarios. Whilst Ehrlich chooses to focus on India for much of the book in order to engage the reader, he also describes China's possible future scenario in great detail. He suggests these scenarios are hypothetical possibilities of events which could take place in the fifteen years following the book's publication.⁶ "Scenario I" states that China will be subjected to flooding, communication loss and severe famine. As a result, food riots and military conflicts with China's neighbours will be widespread. Whilst extreme, some of these events arguably did occur on a regional level in China during this time. Recently, when discussing the validity of the scenarios included in the book, Ehrlich said that "the biggest tactical error in *The Bomb* was the use of scenarios, stories designed to help one think about the future. Although we clearly stated that they were not predictions and that "we can be sure that none of them will come true as stated" (p. 72) - their failure to occur is often cited as a failure of prediction".⁷ He went on to argue that their inclusion remained valid as they highlighted important potential future large-scale threats to the world population.

Public support for the book was strong and the initial critical reviews

⁴Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1991.

⁵Connelly 2006, p. 315.

⁶Ehrlich 1971, p. 39.

⁷Ehrlich and Ehrlich 2009, p. 67.

were favourable.⁸ Its themes resonated with many neo-Malthusian political and social groups in America, whilst the general population could easily relate to the included examples such as Cold War tensions, the Vietnam war, poverty in underdeveloped countries and rioting in some areas of the United States. Meanwhile, global population growth rates were at all time highs and India was battling with crippling famines and drought.⁹ Consequently, environmentalist ideas and concerns of overpopulation were being popularised by scientists and the media alike, such that when the book hit the shelves it was an instant success. Criticism of Ehrlich's ideas emerged rather gradually over the years that followed, perhaps as people grew uncomfortable with the ethical issues that came with dehumanising the world population. Additionally, the neo-Malthusian revival of the 1950s and 1960s began to wane as the technological advances brought about by the 'green revolution' significantly increased the world's food production capacity, thereby quashing previous food security fears and concerns over the use of potent pesticides such as DDT, as discussed by Ehrlich in *The Population Bomb*.¹⁰

The Population Explosion

In a follow-up to their 1968 book, Paul Ehrlich and his wife, Ann, published *The Population Explosion*, claiming that *The Population Bomb* "warned of impending disaster if the population explosion was not brought under control. Then the fuse was burning; now the population bomb has detonated . . . The alarm has been sounded repeatedly, but society has turned a deaf ear".¹¹ It is in this book that China and India's policies are reviewed.

China's one-child policy

First introduced by Deng Xiaoping's government in 1978, China's one-child policy was originally a temporary measure, and followed an extended period of Chairman Mao actively encouraging families to have children as part of the Great Leap Forward, based on the belief that population growth would strengthen the nation.¹² He even went as far as to have supporters of family planning imprisoned.¹³ Surprisingly, however, this era

⁸Reed 2008, p. 47.

⁹Hoff 2012, p. 165.

¹⁰Ehrlich 1971, p. 25-9, 67.

¹¹Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1991; Davis 2007, p. 95.

¹²Potts 2006.

¹³McElroy 2008.

was characterised by a rapid fall in birth rates and also widespread famine, with death estimates reported as several tens of million people,¹⁴ clearly far from the dream of a prosperous nation that Mao had in mind.

Soon after his death, the new government announced the fine-enforced policy, which it has since been claimed has prevented an estimated 400 million births.¹⁵ According to the Chinese government, just 36% of the population were restricted to having one child by the policy, as more than half of the population were permitted to have a second child if their first was female, and most minority groups (approximately 10% of the population) were also exempt.¹⁶ Its aim was to take control of the rapidly growing population and improve living standards which at the time were poor due to the excessive demand on resources, and followed several years of a "late, long, few" family planning publicity campaign, the type of government intervention Ehrlich described in *The Population Bomb* as "inadequate in scope".¹⁷ The effects of the policy are clear, with the fertility rate (mean number of children per woman aged 15 to 44 years) falling from 2.9 in first year of the policy to 1.7 by 2004.¹⁸ However, such results are not without their consequences; the dramatic fall in birth rate over the last 35 years has unnaturally skewed the country's gender balance and age distribution, meaning that the population is now rapidly ageing yet there are comparatively few young workers to support this change, a crucial factor in the absence of a national pension scheme. The severity of this issue becomes clear when one learns of the prediction that the over-65 age group in China is set to double over the next 25 years.¹⁹

In October 2015, it was announced that the policy would be ended, with all couples being permitted to have two children. This followed the announcement two years previously of an initial relaxation of the policy which allowed couples, of whom at least one must be an only child, to have two children if they wished. An additional relaxation had also been introduced in the 1980s, allowing a second child if the first was a girl.²⁰ The move came in response to the severely ageing population, which is feared will not be adequately supported by the comparatively small workforce,²¹ and a gender

¹⁴Gráda 2011, p. 9.

¹⁵Mosher 2011.

¹⁶Xiaofeng 2007.

¹⁷Ehrlich 1971, p. 45.

¹⁸Mamdani and Mamdani 2006.

¹⁹Eberstadt 2007.

²⁰Ehrlich and Ehrlich 2013, p. 193.

²¹Worrall 2015.

imbalance whereby males outstrip females by 18% at birth.²² Research by the French demographer Guilmo to has suggested that this imbalance is the result of a combination of technological advances in prenatal ultrasound screening together with widely available and frequently used abortion procedures.²³ This is despite the Chinese government ruling the use of sex determination tests illegal.²⁴

In *The Population Explosion*, the Chinese one-child policy is praised as "the most successful population-control program in the world . . . a momentous decision. For the first time in history, a nation set as a goal shrinking its population".²⁵ Indeed, in a recent interview, Ehrlich argues that China are one step ahead of the large western countries in that they already have a population policy which appreciates "how important it is to control the size of your populations if you're going to limit emissions".²⁶ This statement also reflects how Ehrlich has adapted this book's focus in comparison to *The Population Bomb* to appeal to the popularisation of green energy, carbon footprints and the destruction of habitats.

Their only reservation was that the policy was introduced too late.²⁷ In particular, they explicitly accuse the Ronald Reagan administration of "turning back the clock on progress in population control", by withdrawing American funding of international population control projects amongst other questionable policy changes.²⁸ The moves contrast those of most other nations of the time, including China, and were met with much skepticism by demographic experts of the time.²⁹

Furthermore, it is suggested that China's undemocratic society was the enabling factor in making a radical population control measure such as the one-child policy possible,³⁰ comparing it to India which has failed to control its overpopulation. For them, the fact that population control was being implemented in China at all arguably allowed the ethically questionable methods to be overlooked and, in particular, the removal of the personal freedom to make reproductive decisions.³¹ Meanwhile, in the United States the politically sensitive issue of abortion hindered population control pro-

²²National Bureau of Statistics of China 2013.

²³Hvistendahl 2012, p. 10.

²⁴Ibid., p. 21.

²⁵Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1991, p. 205-6.

²⁶Finrock 2008, Ehrlich quoted in interview.

²⁷Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1991, p. 208.

²⁸Ibid., p. 194.

²⁹Strout 1984.

³⁰Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1991, p. 205.

³¹White 2006, p. 233.

gress, though the Ehrlichs are quick to point out that effective contraception should always be of primary concern, claiming that failings in this area have led to “disgracefully high abortion rates”.³²

Here, I argue that the Ehrlichs have once again adapted their views in response to criticisms of their dramatic, ethically questionable suggestions for population control. In comparison to *The Population Bomb*, *The Population Explosion* was published on the back foot, at a time when support for the Ehrlichs’ position was diminishing. In order to avoid repeating their previous alarmist tone, the Ehrlichs now describe abortion as “a crude, relatively dangerous method of birth control”, acknowledging that the process can be “difficult psychologically” for women and is “deeply offensive to a sizeable minority of Americans”.³³ It would seem, then, that the Ehrlichs came to realise that attempting to induce fear and alarm was no longer an effective method of persuading the American population of their views.

India’s compulsory sterilisation programme

Compulsory sterilisation of both men and women was conducted in India under Prime Minister Gandhi’s government, at a time when a national state of emergency had been declared.³⁴ In 1976 alone, the year the programme was first introduced, more than six million sterilisations were completed. Reports of police-led forceful sterilisation of poor village communities were frequent, eliciting claims that the programme had eugenic aims. Additionally, deaths due to operations being performed to a poor standard were also high, with numerous cases of botched procedures and severe infection due to the use of unsterile equipment. Unsurprisingly, the programme was initially met with widespread public outrage and violent protests; a new government was elected the following year and as a consequence, sterilisation became voluntary with incentives once more. Moreover, the focus of the programme switched to predominantly female sterilisation, and by 2003, forty women in India were being sterilised for every one male.³⁵ Despite this, deaths within India’s sterilisation camps continue to be a serious concern³⁶ and, whilst the programme is officially voluntary, coercion of certain minority groups is not unheard of.³⁷

In comparison to China, Ehrlich views India as a nation which has failed

³²Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1991, p. 196.

³³Ibid., p. 196.

³⁴Stevens 1983.

³⁵The New York Times 2003.

³⁶BBC News 2014.

³⁷MacAskill 2013.

to gain control of its soaring population, despite previously valiant and pioneering yet ultimately ineffective attempts.³⁸ This view of overlooking the coercion, excessive deaths and socioeconomic targeting is in direct contrast with the general American opinion of ethical disgust and shock, whereby the programme is seen as extreme and unnecessary when alternatives such as contraceptive are available.

As pointed out in *The Population Bomb*, a compulsory sterilisation programme was always going to be logistically challenging; considering those fathers with three or more children, Ehrlich explains that "it would take 1,000 surgeons or para-surgeons operating eight hours a day, five days a week, a full eight years to sterilize the candidates who exist today".³⁹ On reflection in *The Population Explosion*, it is argued that the failure was due to an excessive focus on birth control measures rather than driving a fundamental social change, namely people's attitudes towards family planning. Following the implementation of compulsory sterilisation by Gandhi's government, further progress was stunted due to the politically controversial nature of any further attempts to initiate family planning techniques, thus reflecting the comparatively democratic nature of India's government and its eclectic population.

Conclusion

A comparison of Ehrlich's views on population control with those of the American general population has shown that whilst popularisation of environmentalist ideas at the time of *The Population Bomb's* publication resulted in significant public support, this soon diminished as ethical concerns over the solutions proposed were raised. In particular, the cases of China's one-child policy and India's compulsory sterilisation programme brought about shocking effects which were met with American disapproval. As such, *The Population Explosion* was published to comparatively little support, and its tone was adapted accordingly to appear less alarmist. Since then, China's one-child policy has very recently been relaxed to a two-child policy, a move Ehrlich described as "gibbering insanity".⁴⁰ In 1968, Ehrlich was one of the pioneering voices of the neo-Malthusian movement which advocated the urgent need for population control, and it would seem that whilst western opinion has evolved over time, Ehrlich stubbornly stands by this position to

³⁸Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1991, p. 208.

³⁹Ehrlich 1971, p. 48.

⁴⁰Ehrlich 2015.

the present day.

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