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Review of "Matthew Connelly's Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population: Review Symposium"

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MATTHEW CONNELLY

*Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population**

Review Symposium: Review by Dennis Hodgson

Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population is an exceptional piece of research that is well written and very difficult to put down. Matthew Connelly presents the rise and fall of a “globe-spanning movement to shape demographic trends” (p. 18) that began in the 1870s and ceased in 1994 at the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. He contends that all its various “population controllers” were guided by a “fatal misconception,” a belief that they “could know other people’s interests better than they knew it themselves” (p. 378). I found myself reading this history with one finger back in the Notes section and constantly flipping back and forth to see where the interesting quotes were coming from. We owe a debt of gratitude to Connelly for the broad scope of the sources he examined and for his great diligence in unearthing insightful nuggets from rarely examined archives. Those who think of themselves as demographers will benefit from reading this book, if only for the exposure it gives to events from our disciplinary past. During the decades when demography was establishing itself as an academic discipline, demographers shared many ties with the international population control movement, from common sources of institutional support to a substantial overlap in personnel. The fledgling discipline was itself a small policy-oriented entity with some characteristics of a social movement, and this page-turner does an admirable job of documenting its past ties to eugenics and other movements that many of us might now prefer to ignore.

While I found *Fatal Misconception* difficult to put down, I also found it difficult to fully embrace. Perhaps this is because my ideal historian is someone who is a bit detached from the subject at hand and strives to assume an objective stance. Connelly does not want to be that kind of historian. He takes strong value positions and he doesn’t conceal his advocacy of them. The reader opens the book and finds it dedicated “To my parents, for having so many children” and immediately knows that the author is going to be suspicious of those who believe that large families, or overpopulation, or high rates of population growth ever constituted human problems, and that he, the youngest of eight children, will be wary of any movement that worked to induce couples to adopt a small-family norm. He believes in a strong version of reproductive rights, that every reproductive decision ought to be freely made by the woman who is deciding whether or when to bear a child. And he wants to write history from the bottom up, from the viewpoint of the powerless in every situation: the woman in a patriarchal family, the poor in a society, the colony in a

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colonial system, and the peripheral society in a hegemonic world system. I'm not opposed to these value positions, and it certainly is helpful for the reader to know where the author is coming from. But did Connelly's strong value positions shape the history that he presents? My assessment is that it did have some impact on the content of the story. I also think it had an impact on his presentation of "demographic facts," and certainly on the "lessons of history" arrived at in the conclusion.

An example of such an impact can be found in the first chapter, where one notices that the author conflates a large number of distinct population movements into one "global population control movement." Connelly defines "population control" to include any attempt to influence the demographic behavior of others. So "population controllers" include nationalistic pronatalists, antinatalist neo-Malthusians, immigration restrictionists, eugenicists, sex-reforming birth controllers, and even those who might not respond decisively enough to a famine situation. I remember asking myself whether a global population control movement, so broadly defined, ever really existed. One might have to be an advocate of the powerless who is suspicious of every attempt to shape populations to see such a unified movement. So *Fatal Misconception* might be a history of a movement whose very existence many will dispute. I also was surprised by who didn't make it into Connelly's large list of population controllers, especially since the 1870s was identified as the decade when this movement began. Where are Horatio Storer and his anti-abortion movement and Anthony Comstock with his anti-contraception movement? Why didn't movements that successfully criminalized both birth control and abortion make it into this history? Perhaps it is because these movements were attempting to control the fertility of "elites" in a developed society, targeting middle- and upper-class women who even by this time had quite low fertility.

The examination of the post-World War II international population control movement, a movement that all will admit was real and had a consciously defined goal of reducing rapid population growth in still-agrarian societies, is the centerpiece of this history. And Connelly produces powerful evidence that morally questionable actions were undertaken by movement advocates. He documents, for instance, that President Lyndon Johnson withheld food aid during a famine until India adopted a more vigorous family planning effort, one that included uninformed women being fitted with problematic IUDs by individuals who knew that many of these women would not be able to receive needed medical attention if infections developed. All readers will be repelled by such actions, especially since Connelly so clearly disputes that any need ever existed to lower these populations' fertility in the first place. For such a disbeliever in the population problem there is a great temptation to question what must actually have motivated population controllers, a temptation to which Connelly has succumbed. For instance, there is no doubt, especially now with the extensive documentation of this work, that some participants in this movement engaged in eugenic thinking. But was eugenics really the core concern of this movement? There is also no doubt that some desired to forestall political upheaval in a decolonizing world. But were these family planners really the shock troops of a neocolonial movement to keep oppressed peoples down? Were Scandinavian governments, the Population Council, and the International Planned Parenthood Federation really attempting to usher in a new age of imperialism?

Movement advocates, especially the demographers involved, claimed to be motivated by largely humanitarian concerns. They were disconcerted by the unprecedented rates of population growth that arose after World War II from the sudden implementation of very effective death control techniques throughout much of the world. This entire generation of demographers agreed that fertility decline would occur if populations would modernize: change their economic structures from agriculture to industry, urbanize, and become literate. But they came to despair that such modernization would be possible in the face of unprecedented population growth. They did not want to sit aside and wait until this demographic hurdle to modernization was cleared away by the “cleansing effect” of a massive increase in mortality. This generation believed that they were faced with a crisis, and they convinced themselves that the most direct method of inducing fertility decline, making contraceptives available to peasant populations, might work, and that, considering the alternative, it was worth a try. Connelly does an excellent job of depicting what happened when peasant populations were slow to adopt contraception and some movement advocates pushed questionable “beyond family planning” initiatives; these moral tragedies now have the documentation that they deserve. But is it a fair historical account to contend that the population controllers’ crisis was simply a delusion, their worries unfounded, their real motives largely suspect, and their attempts to “mold populations” immoral? This case has yet to be made.

Connelly links together imperialism and population control as a way to see coherence running through the 100-plus years of his global population control movement. During the period after World War II, he contends, this movement was largely an attempt at neocolonialism, aimed at controlling “populations” as opposed to territory. There are problems with such a representation. First, colonial administrations never actively supported family planning programs, even when they had identified population growth as a cause of instability in their territories. Second, there was great reluctance on the part of the US government, the major First World power of the time, to integrate family planning into its foreign aid programs. The movement was established by nongovernmental organizations with key early roles played by Scandinavian governments, ones without much of a colonial legacy. Third, the two most coercive attempts at population control—the forced sterilization campaign of India and China’s one-child policy—happened after the international population control movement had suffered what Connelly calls its “Waterloo” at the Bucharest conference in 1974. The fact is that both India and China were instrumental in bringing about that Waterloo. Additionally, Indian and Chinese leaders undertook their most coercive programs on their own, without the prodding of the major First World population control players. Although Connelly ties the origin of China’s one-child campaign to a reading of the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* volume, this is a very thin thread with which to connect it to the international population control movement. At a minimum, these inconvenient facts indicate that there is a substantial non-neocolonial dimension to much of the fertility control that has taken place over the last 40 years.

Finally, we must consider Connelly’s conclusions. His story is that at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, the reproductive rights movement decisively vanquished the old global population control movement; that the emancipation of women has led to declining fertility throughout the world; and

that now “[a]ll over the world there has been a shift in the locus of control in how societies reproduce themselves.” Individuals are deciding for themselves how many children to have “with or without anyone’s help or permission” (p. 381). This seems like an ideal situation, but the author notes that we need to be vigilant. We need to apply the lessons of history and “oppos[e] *all* manipulative and coercive policies designed to control populations” (p. 383; emphasis in original). This includes vigilance in the face of pressure to adopt new pronatalist policies in societies with below-replacement fertility and in the face of a more insidious problem: the “privatization of population control” (p. 382). Private individuals in India, China, and elsewhere, not governments, are deciding to abort female fetuses. These individuals “police themselves” and are “unconsciously reproducing and reinforcing inequality with every generation” (p. 382). We are told that “[t]he struggle against population control has shown that it is never enough to insist on choice. Choices can be conditioned by default or design in ways that lead to new kinds of oppression” (p. 384). What we need for true reproductive freedom is global equality, a world “in which every one of us is conceived in liberty and created equal” (p. 384).

In this discussion of the “privatization of population control,” Connelly finally seems to be admitting that the act of having a child always takes place in a social context or, in Kingsley Davis’s words (1948: 556), that “fertility has always, in every kind of society been socially controlled.” If this is true, then perhaps as we wait for global equality to arrive we should recognize that the social context in which reproductive decisions are being made can change in ways that make the presence or absence of a child a more or less joyful social occasion, and that all attempts to manipulate fertility behavior are not necessarily immoral. In societies that have experienced 30 years of below-replacement fertility, the act of having a child is occurring in a new social context, one in which having a child has become a socially beneficial act that should be socially supported. Why is it necessarily immoral for there to be policy recognition of this changed context? Why is it immoral to put into place programs that would allow women to more easily pursue satisfying careers and have children and that would have the public bear part of the costs of feeding, housing, caring for, and educating a child, simply because these programs are designed to “manipulate” reproductive decisions and allow more children to be born? Is the lesson of history really that all such attempts are wrong? And speaking of demographers, is the lesson of history that demographers never should engage in “population thinking,” never should produce population projections that identify the potentially problematic aspects of current trends, and never should offer population policy suggestions?

While there is no way to inoculate any generation of demographers against the possibility of being so thoroughly infected by the prejudices of the day, or by a sense of crisis surrounding an emerging problem, as to do real moral harm, the answer is not disengagement. There is a more modest lesson to be learned from the ethical missteps that Connelly has so vividly documented. We need to make sure that those making policy for others, including policy-oriented disciplines like demography, avoid living in too small a world. They need to strive for a diverse membership that remains open to questioning basic assumptions. They need to have multiple constituencies, both as sources of support and as audiences for their findings. And they need to perform a valuable social service by fully engaging with the policy challenges of their day. With luck, when their actions have become history, they will find a