

Book Review:

*Fatal Misconception:
The Struggle to Control World Population*

by Matthew Connelly

By

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“Who shall inherit the earth?”¹ is one of the questions raised by Matthew Connelly in his book *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population*. This question is asking how many people and what kind of people should inherit the earth. One would think that this question would only be asked if there were very few people living on this planet, or if human society were facing extinction, yet the question is raised at a time when there is a population of approximately seven billion. There should be nothing to worry because the number and diversity of people is large enough. The real problem is that there are people who want to control global population or even restrict the reproduction of comparatively poor or, backward people, or those with mental or physical problems. By eliminating those “problematic people,” the quality of the human race could be improved and resources could be shared in a more balanced way. This selection has been taking place throughout modern history. However, Connelly does not support this idea of population control because it violates others’ right to reproduce and to live on this planet. Sacrificing the rights of certain people to serve others reflects backwardness rather than progress.

Connelly is currently a professor in the Department of History at Columbia University. He has a wide variety of research interests. His doctoral dissertation *The Algerian War for Independence: An International History* (1997) indicated his early interests in colonialism, Cold War politics and African history. The development of his interest in population history is reflected in articles such as “Population Control is History: New Perspectives on the International Campaign to Limit Population Growth”² and “To Inherit the Earth: Imagining World Population, From the Yellow

¹ Matthew James Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 6.

² Matthew James Connelly, “Population Control Is History: New Perspectives on the International Campaign to Limit Population Growth,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 1 (2003), 122-147.

Peril to the Population Bomb,”³ in which he investigated issues of population control from a global perspective. He is also interested in reflecting on the future based on historical developments. Specifically, population issues are among the problems which he identifies as characterizing the future of human history.

The book *Fatal Misconception* introduces both national and international attempts to control populations from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries. Connelly gives a fresh but convincing definition of population control, which “includ[es] any attempt to influence the demographic behavior of others,”⁴ such as ethnic cleansing in wars, changing human genes, tightening immigration restrictions, sterilization, birth control, abortion, and family planning.

Connelly traces and explains the development of global population control in nine chapters. He demonstrates how the concept of eugenics first changed to birth control and then family planning, and finally raised people’s awareness to their rights to give birth and reproduction. He follows the development of population control in a chronological way, roughly from the 1870s to the 1990s, demonstrating the evolution of population control through international events like wars and national issues such as independence, nationalism and economic development. The book offers a transnational approach to the topic, explaining how ideas about population control developed in Europe and the United States, and then spread to Asia, Africa, and other places in the world. Though Connelly offers a focused discussion on India’s and China’s population policies with a seemingly national approach, he believes that these two countries were affected by the “networks of expertise, technologies and ideas”

³ Matthew James Connelly, “To Inherit the Earth: Imagining World Population, From the Yellow Peril to the Population Bomb,” *Journal of Global History* 1 no. 3 (2006), 299-319.

⁴ Dennis Hodgson, “Review of *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population*, by Matthew James Connelly,” *Population and Development Review* 6, no. 1 (2011), 567 .

from the international community.⁵ Their policies were “at least partly inspired and often justified by international sentiments.”⁶

In chapters one and two, Connelly examines the racial and moral confrontations between different parties on the issues of population control and eugenics. Chapter three explains how population policies were manipulated by governments as a tool in the Second World War. Chapter four explains how birth control was introduced to the Third World as a way to achieve modernization. In chapter five, Connelly explores how different organizations and funds contributed to the development of international population control. Chapter six looks into how contraception methods were adopted by Asian and African people. Chapter seven discusses the implementation of family planning programs in less developed countries. Chapter eight demonstrates how funds and contraception methods were inappropriately used in conducting population control in India. In chapter nine, Connelly raises the issue of reproductive rights by discussing China’s one-child policy and the 1994 Cairo Conference. He draws the conclusion that if population control is not regulated, it will be a threat to human beings and human rights in the future.

Connelly argues that individuals should have the right and freedom to reproduce. The government, the Church, and the international community should not intervene in their decisions. He thinks that “the great tragedy of population control, the fatal misconception, was to think that one could know other people’s interests better than they knew it themselves.”⁷ Connelly rejects all ways to “remake humanity,” including reducing population size or improving the genes of specific groups of humans, because they are unjustifiable and cause traumatic suffering. None

⁵ Matthew James Connelly, “Author Response: All Biopolitics is Global,” *History and Technology Forum* 26, no. 1 (2010), 87.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Connelly, *Fatal Misconception*, 387.

of the so-called “urgencies” claimed by the international community, like shortages of resources and economic development, are legitimate causes.⁸ He does not think that “overpopulation or high rates of population growth ever constituted human problems.”⁹ On the other hand, Betsy Hartmann argues in her review that Connelly is not completely “anti-birth control and abortion;” she thinks what concerns Connelly most is if those methods are safe enough and whether individuals have accepted them voluntarily.¹⁰

Connelly outlines several dilemmas and tensions on international population control. Reviewer Martin Collins understands the “struggle” in Connelly’s book title as a reference to international population control institutions’ efforts to obtain funds from governments and to gain recognition and support from the people in order to work out their plans.¹¹ In my opinion, Connelly’s “struggle” refers more to the conflict between “fit” and “unfit” people.¹² The fit wanted to control the quantity and quality of the world population by keeping the fit and reducing the number of the unfit: white people worried about growing numbers of yellow and black people. Totalitarian governments wanted to eliminate entire rival races. Developed countries warned that the earth could not support less developed countries if their populations continued to grow. People under colonial rule also wanted to build up their own populations to develop their own identity against the colonial government. The Catholic Church and Islamic groups are opposed to birth control while women demand the right to control their own bodies. These demonstrate the complex nature of population control as an issue with political, racial, social, economic, religious,

⁸ Betsy Hartmann, “Review of *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population*, by Matthew James Connelly,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 44, no. 3 (2009), 545.

⁹ Hodgson, “Review of *Fatal Misconception*,” 566 .

¹⁰ Hartmann, “Review of *Fatal Misconception*,” 545.

¹¹ Martin Collins, “Review of *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population*, by Matthew James Connelly,” *History and Technology Forum* 26, no. 1 (2010), 60.

¹² Connelly, *Fatal Misconception*, 17.

moral and diplomatic aspects.

Connelly defines “population control” in an unusually specific and inclusive way. In terms of methods, he argues that population control entails more than mere birth control methods like abortion, sterilization and IUDs; he also includes other ways of population control that go beyond contraception, such as immigration restrictions, eugenics, and education about birth control. In terms of numbers, birth control is not limited to reducing population. For instance, he demonstrates how totalitarian governments in Europe, like Nazi Germany, intentionally encouraged their populations to give birth to more children for the country while reducing the number of Jews through genocide. Connelly is thus effective in offering a broader and more complete definition which helps readers to look at issues of population control with a different perspective.

The author believes that the world should not impose coercive measures on limiting people’s freedom of reproduction. He thinks that it is unfair for elites to claim that they know the needs of others, in particular of people living in poor and less developed countries, and impose population controls on them. His book title *Fatal Misconception* is well-chosen, on the one hand implying population control being a misleading idea which will not work, and on the other offering an analogy to a pregnancy that will not result in a healthy baby. It demonstrates his stance that coercive population control cannot really help humans produce offspring with higher quality, or solve the population problems that mankind has encountered in modern history. He therefore implies that population control will become a threat to humanity in the future if governments continue ignoring people’s rights of reproduction and if people fail to see the dangerous and inhumane nature of population control and continue accepting it. That said, I think population control is not always unreasonable. I agree with Connelly that the right of reproduction is important, but I also think that

people should be aware of their responsibility to reflect before reproducing. People in poor countries will only suffer more if they continue having many children but not the means to raise them. This will intensify the poverty of a family and the shortage of resources of a country. It will in turn pose extra financial burdens to governments and the international community for offering assistance. Connelly only sees the rights of the people but neglects their responsibilities to the national and international communities.

The book is an interesting account of the modern history of world population control. It provides abundant information about international efforts to control populations, including the work of international institutions such as the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, International Planned Parenthood Federation, and the Population Council. It explains population changes in relation to different events like racial conflicts, world wars, the development of colonies toward and beyond independence, and international conferences on food and population. All these provide a comprehensive picture about the development and changes of global population control. However, most of the book is somewhat descriptive. Connelly focuses too much on historical facts and descriptions of the processes of how institutions and individuals dealt with different governments, sought financial support, attended international conferences, promoted and conducted birth control, and faced resistance from local populations. The author's opinions about these different parties' approach to population control and his evaluations of the overall effectiveness of international efforts to control global populations would have been an interesting addition to the book.

Connelly's book provides abundant demographic data. Reviewer McQuillan

criticizes that the demographic information in the book is limited.¹³ In my opinion, however, the numbers and figures that Connelly provides, based on his archival research at the World Bank and the Ford Foundation, are adequate: Connelly is a historian rather than a demographer and it is unnecessary for him to discuss the history of world population in a way a demographer would, focusing too much on the numbers. Connelly also includes illustrations in the book, including political cartoons, posters and photos. All these further help convey his ideas effectively and make the book more attractive to readers.

Despite the aforementioned merits, Connelly's book also has some shortcomings. As an academic work of world history, the book's coverage of the world is still inadequate. Its discussion mainly focuses on Europe and the United States, examining how ideas of eugenics and birth control were generated there, and then promoted to the rest of the world. Connelly covers Asia and Africa with a focused discussion of the Indian sterilization programs and China's one-child policy, in the last two chapters. He also includes examples from diverse places like Algeria, Kenya, Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, Japan, and Bangladesh; however, details from the Pacific region (except Australia) and Latin America can barely be found. Though Connelly also states that it is "an impossible task" to conduct research on the population policies of every country in the world,¹⁴ instead of offering already well-known examples from India and China, it would have been much more interesting to evaluate the population policies of other, less-known places. It is surprising that Connelly misses Thailand's "voluntary national programme," which effectively reduced the average number of children per woman from six to three in

¹³ Kevin McQuillan, "Review of *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population*, by Matthew James Connelly," *Canadian Studies in Population* 37, no. 3-4 (2010), 624.

¹⁴ Connelly, "All Biopolitics is Global," 86.

just two decades.¹⁵ In this sense, the book is not quite true to the meaning of world history, which would include all parts of the world.

The book introduces many individuals at population control institutions like the International Planned Parenthood Federation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation, but all of these “elites”, except for Margaret Sanger, are not well-known.¹⁶ I agree with McQuillan that it can be doubted that these people have really had such a great influence on the population policies of different countries. Even Sanger did not attract much government attention because her ideas on eugenics were quite radical. Moreover, Connelly himself mentions that Communist China had already realized its overpopulation problem and imposed policies to control population in 1970. The IPPF only visited China in 1977 and the People’s Republic only agreed to work with the United Nations Population Fund on the one-child policy in the 1980s;¹⁷ thus, China’s determination to control population was not initiated by international efforts. In the 1990s, when there were voices from the West suggesting China relax reproductive restrictions, China did not accept their suggestions or stop the one-child policy. Connelly clearly overestimates the roles played by these population control institutions in China’s population policies. This demonstrates that these institutions and their personnel are not really significant in influencing the global population control.

Connelly almost entirely rejects all coercive measures imposed by the international community without considering their causes and the time periods those individuals lived in.¹⁸ People today would obviously think that eugenics and racist

¹⁵ Dave Johns and Amy Fairchild, “Review of *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population*, by Matthew James Connelly,” *Global Public Health* 34, no. 3 (2008), 99.

¹⁶ McQuillan, “Review of *Fatal Misconception*,” 624.

¹⁷ Connelly, *Fatal Misconception*, 339 and 343.

¹⁸ McQuillan, “Review of *Fatal Misconception*,” 624.

ideas are problematic; however, the individuals who suggested the genetic improvement of humans were living in the twenties and thirties, when ideas we consider racist today were mainstream in many countries. It is unwise to criticize these ideas as extreme or radical, because this reflects today's point of view. For example, Connelly sees the rapid population growth after the Second World War as an unprecedented threat to human society which "set off alarms about the future."¹⁹ It is questionable that this population boom was highly problematic, given that the wars of the previous decades had taken away millions of lives.

Contraception is always key when discussing population control. Connelly explores the development of contraception, using the contraceptive pill and IUDs as examples when describing how people thought of contraception. Yet he does not include other, more traditional contraceptive methods such as observing menstruation cycles. Moreover, it is misleading that Connelly fails to mention that contraceptive measures and ideas already existed in medieval and ancient times, giving readers the impression that contraception is purely a modern thing.

Connelly also ignores several groups of people when discussing population control. He focuses too much on the poor countries while ignoring the rich; population control policies do not only affect the poor.²⁰ Is it justified that people in developed countries have more children just because they have the economic means? Most developed countries have low birth rates, but does this give them the right to object to other, more populated countries' increasing populations? A discussion of these controversial issues would have been a welcome addition to the book. Moreover, Connelly also focuses too much on women in his book and ignores the role of men. For instance, he thoroughly examines the use of IUDs and the pill as contraceptive

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Johns and Fairchild, "Review of *Fatal Misconception*," 100.

measures, but excludes a discussion of how men use condoms and other birth control methods. He discusses the sexual education of young girls but fails to include boys in this context.

Connelly is also quite idealistic to conclude that “the reproductive rights movement decisively vanquished the old global population control movement” by offering the example of the emancipation of women and the loosened policy of China in controlling population from the 1990s onward.²¹ In fact, most women in Islamic countries continue to observe the will of their husbands on reproduction; and China continues to fine families with too many children. His view that the global population control is in decline is an overly optimistic estimation.

In my opinion, the book is useful as an academic work to help world history students develop a deeper interest in and understanding of the field. It inspired me to reflect on the nature of world history, and the necessity to include the entire world and all human races in it. I think human beings are the most important elements in constituting history. History without humans is meaningless, and world history is only meaningful when all groups of human beings are included. Therefore, attempts to reduce or eliminate certain groups of humans are never justifiable or moral. Moreover, the book is useful for me as a world history student to relate the issue of population to other themes about which I have learnt in the seminars. Religion, for example: in addition to Catholicism and Islam, other religions might have specific attitudes on population control and reproduction. Connections with imperialism are apparent in the intentions of colonial governments in introducing birth control in order to limit or modernize colonial peoples. How the different waves of feminist movements in the world influenced birth rates is also interesting to look at. War, in addition to reducing

²¹ Hodgson, “Review of *Fatal Misconception*,” 568.

population, has also shown to increase populations through wartime and postwar governments' policies. All these demonstrate the feature of world history as a super-scale of history which involves large numbers of issues. This allows me to explore other themes related to population issues and to understand the complex nature of population control from a global perspective.

Fatal Misconception is overall a useful work which contributes to the field of global history. It offers a comprehensive introduction to national and international attempts to control populations, combines population issues with other themes, and provides abundant demographic data, thus constituting an informative account of population history. Though it lacks a profound discussion of developed countries, male populations, and less known places, it is still valuable for world history students as a basis for understanding population history and further exploring related areas. In a moral sense, the book treasures individuals' freedom to reproduce and rejects all coercive measures of population control, conveying the positive message that all life is precious. It is undeniable that everybody has the right to inherit the earth, the right to birth and life. But blindly producing babies would mean ignoring the world's actual situation and one's responsibility, and will only bring more sufferings to humans, which is another fatal misconception.

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