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Toward Policy Specificity

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Population Debate Revisited](#)

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The [essay](#) by Ian Lowe is a welcome and measured contribution to debates around population control and its contribution in the pursuit of sustainability. Lowe makes a reasonable case for non-intrusive family planning, both in the Global North and South, and is careful to distance himself from more problematic discourses of overpopulation, and the prescriptions that come out of them.

An important question is why population remains a “taboo” for many of us, and on this, I am not sure if the essay gives a full answer. One reason obviously is the problematic uses to which claims of overpopulation have been put in the past, which Lowe acknowledges, and the uneasiness among many of us to be bedfellows with the “carrying capacity network” crowd that wants immigrants out and thinks that our boats have already too many castaways in them and we better leave the ones out to drown. One may argue, as Lowe does in this essay, that this association between concerns for population and racism or xenophobia is coincidental and not necessary and that one could develop an empowering and progressive narrative around questions of population. Still, there is something intrinsically problematic, I fear, in thinking of humans as a number of bodies, which lends itself easily to a “bird’s eye view” of human affairs and a state perspective of people as numbers that need to be governed and managed (increased or decreased). This approach to “population” does not sit easily with goals of social justice, unless we develop a more nuanced and careful language than that of IPAT, with its back-of-the-envelope calculations.

If one were to develop a more egalitarian and emancipatory narrative around issues of what we now call “population,” then feminism and movements for birth control could be a good starting point. I saw little in this direction in the essay, and I wonder why (for those interested, in my book [Limits](#), and following the clues from Joan Martinez-Alier, I have a short section on the birth control activism of Emma Goldman and other anarchofeminists at the turn of the twentieth century in the US, which presented a very different logic and starting point than that of the dominant narratives about population today).

In fact, what I missed in the essay the most were specifics. What forms of family planning precisely? How is population to be controlled in a non-intrusive way—with what policy measures, with what voluntary initiatives? What has worked well, and what not? Why and how would fathers and mothers in the Global North be convinced to have one child? What policies do Global South countries themselves consider? What demands are coming from social or feminist movements in the Global South or North that speak to these questions?

Without such specifics, I am afraid that a general discussion about “over”-population risks always the danger of turning into a game of othering, even under the best of intentions. Those of us who stand for degrowth have developed our discourse beyond a critique of limitless growth to a positive agenda with specific proposals for political, institutional and everyday changes. Our proposals remain speculative, but at least their specificity makes it harder to end up with strange bedfellows. Those who call for egalitarian and progressive paths of population decrease must do the same.

About the Author



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