



## Testing Biopolitics against World Population growth in the 20th century

Paul-André ROSENAL

**The fear of a global demographic explosion, starting in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, has prompted birth-control policies. According to Matthew Connelly, the will of men in the North to impact the behaviours of women in the South has been inefficient and hurtful. He describes humanity as a Janus-like figure, both an ideal and a field of confrontation.**

Reviewed: Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population*, Belknap, Harvard University Press, 2008, 521 pp.

The term biopolitics has been the object of wide-ranging uses, from its definition as a subject – the set of processes clearly conceived to shape populations – to critiques of the increasingly strict forms of control that these imply, even in a democracy. Predictably, these two views are articulated in general terms, benefiting from the notion's capacity to build a critique of modernity. The present reflection aims at questioning this articulation and at showing that the construction of a field of biopolitical action cannot necessarily be reduced to population control if modes of political regulation at work in a given society are also taken into account.

The question that arises in the background concerns population policies in democratic regimes. Critical approaches have accustomed us to demystifying the determination to control that can accompany the most 'social' policies, and from this perspective, to establishing a continuity with initiatives of authoritarian regimes. However, this insistence on the modalities of these policies that can indeed share several common features, leads us to forget that they are part of a different normative regime, that the means used to impose them are not identical, nor is their legitimacy and appraisal of the same nature. From this perspective, a study of the democratic state's actions on civil society is yet to be carried out. Without claiming to provide a theory here, I will attempt to sketch some of its features by testing it against a large-scale historical object, namely, the growth of world population in the last one hundred years. The occasion is provided by the appearance in 2008 of Matthew Connelly's work *Fatal*

*Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Belknap, Harvard University Press),<sup>1</sup> whose arguments are discussed here.

The planet's demographic explosion, from 1.6 to 6 billion inhabitants in the period 1900 to 2000, is not in itself one of the most notable phenomena of the twentieth century. Established before the First World War as an object of knowledge and the target of public and private national and international actions, it henceforth formed a field of political confrontation that incorporated a wide panoply of ideologies. It has been the subject of global history in the dual meaning that this word can carry today: both on a global scale and in multiple relevant fields. By raising questions linked for more than a century not only essentially to demography, but also to sexuality, reproduction, women's rights or relations within the couple, this population growth, as well its representations, is unquestionably at the heart of biopolitics.

The other interest of the book is no doubt the fact that it is one of the first works of synthesis on this subject to take into account the recent advances of historiography, liberated from the unanimously accusatory attitudes of the 1980s. At that time, unveiling the obscure origins of population policies, beginning with their links to dictatorial regimes that had inegalitarian ideologies such as eugenics or racism, constituted both a discovery and a reconsideration of the latest representatives of modernising elites (administrative or scholarly) still in place in the post-war years, as well as of the foundation of collective modes of intervention that were more respectful of individuals. This phase – which was necessary but reductive, not to mention simplistic – could hardly continue forever. Matthew Connelly rightly questions conspiratorial theories, and shatters an essentialist history of ideas, paying some attention to the plasticity of scholarly ideologies. His objective, it is true, lends itself to the task: as the book reminds us, far from having been the privilege of young radical demographers in the post-1968 years, the denunciation of the dark hours of authoritarianism of birth control fed the arguments of religious fundamentalists who launched the major offensive of the pro-life movement in the 1980s.

However, as the book reveals, since the end of nineteenth century and closer to the interwar period, birth control policies were being established in a climate in which the fear of a demographic explosion of non-white populations coincided with Western countries treading

---

<sup>1</sup> An abridged version of this review is due to appear in Italian in the journal *Contemporanea*.

the path of falling birth rates, and eugenicist fears of a deterioration in the ‘quality of population’ through under-reproduction of the well-born were gaining ground. The progress of secularisation accompanied the growing assertion of the couple’s right to sexual fulfilment, and feminist aspirations of women’s right to dispose of their body and their life, particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries hardly sensitive to pronatalist arguments. After 1945 and the rejection of Nazism, birth control, reconverted under the garb of family planning, a more nuanced vision cleansed of its more marked eugenic connotations,<sup>2</sup> led to policies designed to bring about a decline in birth rates in the southern countries. They were inaugurated by India and Pakistan at the end of the 1950s. They would peak in the following two decades, whether in terms of numbers or budgets involved, whereas their mass nature and, in many cases, brutality, would reach new heights in India and China in the 1980s.

### **Fatal Misconception**

While the essence of what has just been said was largely known, Connelly’s proposal is that this quite frenetic voluntarism – fed by a dramatic rhetoric, permanently playing upon the undercurrents of war against mortal threats (famine, poverty, but also, in an undertone, communism or the West’s submersion by the populations of the South) and fed in the 1970s by a veritable budgetary deluge – was ineffectual and above all, led to suffering. Even if one claims that it constituted a more legitimate goal than development aid, one may argue retrospectively that the decrease in fertility began before family planning policies, and, as in Brazil, would have even occurred without them under the impact of women’s education and urbanisation.

I shall return briefly to this idea of ineffectiveness, which the author could have underlined as not being a foregone conclusion but rather a thesis in a debate that is far from being settled. For the moment, let me instead detail the more salient points of the book. The first concerns the extraordinary process initiated to reduce population fertility in the South. In the first place, this presupposes a “construction of the problem” by militants of the interwar period along the lines of the feminist Margaret Sanger – by presenting her as a heroic figure, Connelly largely conceals her eugenic convictions and her attempts at scientific

---

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Sauvy, as a committed pronatalist actor of his time, discussed the connotations specific to birth control in « Langage et population. Une forme de malthusianisme », *Population*, 7, 3, 1952, in particular pp. 469-470. See also Betsy Hartmann, « Population control (I), Birth of an ideology », *International Journal of Health Services* 27, 3, 1997, pp. 523-540.

indoctrination.<sup>3</sup> Population policies then required an institutional build-up of great complexity, associating, among others, international organisations (ILO, UNO), national and international NGOs (family planning, feminist associations, religious lobbies), Churches, learned or professional societies, pharmaceutical laboratories, philanthropic foundations and states, with some of these actors being naturally inclined to internal divisions. One of the book's major contributions is to trace the struggles of interministerial influence in India in the second half of the twentieth century, and the rivalry of specialised UN agencies (UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO) in the biopolitical field. The huge planetary machinery was oiled by finances that, in the 1970s, ended up outstripping its capacity: a 'system without a brain' rather than the invention of a demiurge, even if Connelly happily describes the influence (and the lifestyle) of the demographic jet set of the period. In some Asian countries, tens of thousands of people worked to reduce fertility, from the propagandists circulating in the villages to doctors and nurses practising mass sterilisations, by way of Indonesian village chiefs who reminded women to take the pill by the beating of the drum. This veritable worldwide workshop of family planning was subjected to every successive administrative fashion from the optimisation of costs/benefits to mass standardisation: in the 1970s, 'on the model of T Ford' (p. 234), programmes had to be indifferently transferable from the Pacific to Southern Asia via Africa and South America.

In this arrangement, the woman, the father or the couple were, over a long period, reduced to the role of 'acceptors'. Measures were sometimes forced on populations on a major scale: compulsory sterilisations that spoke or not their names; medical complications in contraceptive methods clumsily practised by staff who were badly paid or paid per operation; financial sanctions for couples who had been too fertile; and sometimes bloody repressions of resistant populations, as in India under the influence of Sanjay Gandhi, son of Indira Gandhi. A number of these initiatives served as a smoke screen to disguise ethnic, religious or 'social' policies: for governments, family planning could provide an opportunity to control the demographic growth of a particular minority or limit the dangers of a political explosion linked to poverty.

In 1983, the scale of birth policies in China reached its maximum: 16 million sterilisations for women and 4 million for men, 14 million abortions in addition to 18 million

---

<sup>3</sup> One of the weak points in the book, in contrast with its references to the history of (contraceptive) techniques, is its casual treatment of science. Connelly neglects the reciprocal construction of policies and knowledge, reducing scientific rivalries to conflicts between dominant males – creating incidentally the impression that female scientists simply had no ego.

IUD insertions; in all, more than 50 million people were affected that year, under, it is true, very diverse circumstances (p. 348).

### **The Value of Human Life**

Partly, expectations from these initiatives raise a question that is not often dealt with: namely, that of the long-term history of the value of human life. Over several decades, there was a recurrent idea that the reduction of mortality and, more particularly, of infant mortality, was a problem whose effects on development and political stability must be countered. Did not the essayist William Vogt, in his 1948 best seller, reproach the medical corps for continuing “to believe it has a duty to keep alive as many people as possible?” Some decades later, this would give way to a policy of gender, mobilised as a means of action: while the current deterioration of the sex ratio at birth in Asia, thanks to the availability of tools permitting *in utero* detection of the child’s sex, is well known, Connelly reminds us that it was cynically anticipated and then used as an instrument of birth control.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the obvious notion that women should be sensitised to the idea of family planning while in a state of post-partum weakness spread from the maternity wards of Southern countries to poor American neighbourhoods.

Here, strict biopolitical control was exercised in the absence of centralised power, with the states themselves forcefully staging a comeback in the 1980s to regain control over birth policies. Clearly, this schema reconciles several facets of Michel Foucault’s work, from the obsession with control presented in *Discipline and Punish* to the fragmentation of power that characterises *The History of Sexuality*. However, the merit of *Fatal Misconceptions* lies in showing us that we should not stop to contemplate the terrifying demographic monster unleashed by those playing God in the decline of births: the question being not to deny this tentacular picture but to reject its unilaterality and lack of nuances.

I will only briefly mention the most obvious correction: by not crediting family planning with having familiarised couples with the very principle of taking relatively reliable action regarding their fertility, Connelly chooses to minimise, even deny, the effects that it could have produced on the capacity of women and couples to lead their lives.<sup>5</sup> The author

---

<sup>4</sup> On the long history and stakes of this question see Éric Brian and Marie Jaisson, *Le sexisme de la première heure*, Raison d’agir, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> One must nevertheless take into account Kate Fisher and Simon Szreter’s as yet unpublished research which shows that British households sometimes found the extension of contraceptive norms and practices from the 1930s to the 1950s to be a burden.

does not explain this fully, but it is difficult not to believe that family planning at least contributed to spreading a new sensitivity regarding sexuality and procreation. In the 1970s, for instance, proponents of birth decline did not hesitate to preach new forms of the family, including working mothers and the right to homosexuality (pp. 265, 266). Beyond this, a more complex gaze would mean reading between the lines, connecting the work to a broader and more contrasted history and, above all, ignoring the author's concern not to offend anyone by reconciling all the political values considered as positive in his time – an attitude that was recompensed by the book's reception: it was a blockbuster in the United States.

Connelly's central thesis is that if political authorities of birth control failed to influence the course of things, it was because they ignored the individuals concerned. This statement takes three different forms according to the case. The first is the most general: the failure of a nucleus of men from the North to significantly influence the behaviours of women in the South demonstrates that no one should seek to impose policies on anyone other than oneself. Generous and characteristic of the rejection of current modernisation policies in our *zeitgeist*, this formulation cannot fail to raise some questions for the European reader: is not the refusal of forms of solidarity, which in an extreme case threaten the unity of countries like Belgium or Italy, part of this morality that is at first glance unquestionable, but which can easily lead to a situation of 'each man for himself'? More generally, one can wonder what is revealed by the success of a work that reduces policy to acting only on oneself.

The second statement is more substantial: it consists of pinning the failure of brutal family planning policies on their objectivism. Having failed to consider the specific viewpoints of diverse populations in the name of a concern for industrial standardisation, it was impossible to expect that these populations would adopt policies that treated them like objects. This question of contempt and the reactions it provoked could have been the principal subject of the book, given that it regularly touches upon both the conception as well as the reception of birth policies. Since the 1950s, the clever and influential Frederick Osborn made it mandatory for the crypto-eugenics that was being developed to stop "humiliating one half of the individuals who comprise the human race by telling them that they are not as fit as the other half to procreate the next generation" (p. 165). Closer to the contemporary period, a growing number of 'dominant' actors, politicians, militants or experts, have disguised their discourse or at least consciously cleansed it of all its rough edges, whether relating to class, race or sex. The Catholic Church, concerned with influencing mores, has taken great care to publicly maintain a distance from debates on family planning since the interwar period,

preferring to invite or orchestrate more discreet spokesmen – this underground history, sustained by the study of the Vatican's unpublished sources, is a strong point of the book.

### **Accountability Matters**

Connelly's third criticism concerns accountability and has perhaps the greatest political reach. Ignoring populations also implies that policies designed to bring about a decline in birth rates were applied by organisations, some of which, whether associations or international organisations, did not have to justify their aims, actions or balance sheets directly to the populations they intended to shape. But whatever the power of their machinery, the book persistently testifies – alas, all too quickly – to the capacity of individuals and couples to initiate and react; however, it also shows that political entities (from village or religious communities to electoral bodies) and their agencies determined the successes and failures of birth control policies.

From this point of view, the book justifies 'microscopic' approaches, if only partially. Shrewd Indian peasants who faked their age in order to be sterilised only when they were on the verge of becoming infertile, or delayed taking action as long as they anticipated an increase in their bonuses, were not simply putting up with the system. Behind them looms a much wider question of consent, to use a term popularised by the historiography of the First World War. It is not certain if Connelly, as a producer of a vision of history often closer to methodological paternalism than to social history, has always drawn lessons from the rich observations that strew his book in this sense. As regards contraceptive practices, in 1927 the Reverend John Montgomery Cooper, an anthropologist at the Catholic University of America and leader of the struggle against the 'plague' of birth control, predicted: "we are destined almost inevitably to witness a great increase in the prevalence of the practice among Catholics in the United States within the next generation or two" (p. 67). This prediction would have merited a chapter rather than a paragraph. It announced a reversal that was inconceivable for most contemporaries: a reversal that tormented followers, especially in the 1950s – a situation that is unfortunately neglected by the author, even though it would have given an idea of the anthropological upheaval that, well before the sensational 'liberation' at the end of the 1960s, occurred underground in the second third of the twentieth century.

The same applied to clinics established by birth control activists that reconverted to marriage counselling. One or two allusions are made here and there in the book, without Connelly ever discussing the significance of this major change by which a eugenics

programme, initially conceived in an ultra-hereditary biological perspective, became a means of psychologising social relations and contributed to the growing power of the couple's right to fulfilment. At fault here is an ignorance of historiography that has begun to document the question, particularly in the German case;<sup>6</sup> in this case, couples themselves came to expropriate the plans and ideologies of experts to the extent of rendering them unrecognisable.

### **Comparing Coercion**

For all that, the work's demonstration is not limited to the predominant role of personal aspirations and therefore to the 'micro'. Its success stems from its capacity to place this coercive vision of biopolitics that titillates contemporary sensitivity on a global scale. However, the book turns against itself above all by revealing the strength of politics and particularly the opposition between democracies and dictatorships. What *Fatal Misconception* reveals is not only the existence of what could be called a 'biopolitical resistance': it implies that its forms and cost, far from being uniform, depend on the modalities of political regulation. The state of demographic emergency declared by Indira Gandhi during her first mandate not only led to initiatives of great brutality but to a repression that went as far as shooting citizens. It was the vote, however, that sanctioned this policy: birth control at any cost reached such high proportions that it became one of the main issues of India's 1977 general elections, leading to the downfall of the Congress party and its first defeat since independence.

One of the interests of Connelly's book is its grading of the coercive element of policies that, seen from afar, share many common features. The one-child policy in China not only went further in controlling and pressurising women and couples, it also rendered their strategies of circumvention even more difficult and painful by leading them, for instance, to abandon their children. Naturally, all this resistance had no hope of culminating in political action of any magnitude. At a time when the legitimacy of electoral democracy tends to be downplayed, it is appropriate to underline the virtue of the notion of accountability that

---

<sup>6</sup> I should like to make an observation on the limitations of *World History*: while entirely agreeing with Connelly's considerations on the global nature of his object, it must be admitted that the essential part of his book deals with four major areas, which is already a lot: the United States, India, NGOs involved with family planning and, to a lesser extent, the Vatican. In many cases, his mention of other countries is cosmetic and even fallacious – as is unhappily true of France in particular. This remark is not a criticism, given that the subject's magnitude poses a problem for the writing of history. However, without claiming to offer a solution to anything other than the institution of a carefully integrated collective writing, it would be wrong to expunge the sometimes serious weaknesses linked to an insufficient knowledge of national situations and to a viewpoint that, whatever the author's claims, remains that of an American historian.



Connelly fruitfully mobilises. If there is one question his book raises that is both politically brave and heuristically fertile, it is well and truly that of the supposed moral superiority of NGOs representing the effervescence of civil society as opposed to the Moloch state assumed to embody the blind tyranny of the nation: the latter is held accountable, in democracies at least, to those whom it administers.

Even so, one must not fall into a reverse simplification. By seizing an object that is incontestably global, the book also presents two dimensions of the notion of humanity. The first, upheld by international organisations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is the result of a universal ideal that posits the idea of a higher interest in the name of a condition shared equally by one and all. The second, however, is the idea of enmeshed interests, stakes and ambitions that have become global to the extent of leading to a potential struggle of all against all, a struggle that the ‘international community’ labours to control, involving as it does the interests of the states of which it is ultimately made up.

If Connelly had not sought an ideologically irreproachable position, he would have more convincingly discussed the ambiguity of the nation-state, both the peak of democratic evolution and the perfect expression of egoism and willpower. He would also have described humanity as a Janus-like figure, both an ideal and a field of confrontation. Had it been less deferential to good sentiments, *Fatal Misconception*, thanks to the rich empirical material it provides, could have fed the current of thought that tries to envisage the twin face of globalisation without angelic, paranoiac or simplistic statements<sup>7</sup>.

First published in [www.laviedesidees.fr](http://www.laviedesidees.fr). Translated from the French by **Arundhati Virmani**.

Published in [www.booksandideas.net](http://www.booksandideas.net), 21 March 2011.

©booksandideas.net

---

<sup>7</sup> See the stimulating book by Wiktor Stoczkowski, *Anthropologies rédemptrices. Le monde selon Lévi-Strauss*, Paris, Hermann, 2008.