

Population Control Policies: What Western Bias and Eugenics History Overlook

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Abstract: Human consumption is the greatest threat to our planet today. Many countries are addressing this through clean energy initiatives, the impact of which have not been substantial enough to mitigate environmental damages thus far. This is largely because clean energy is not enough to mitigate the effects of our overuse of energy. In other words, there are too many humans using too much energy and not enough is being done to address it. The environmental crisis would see far more progress if lawmakers aimed to unmanageable overconsumption of humans on this planet. However, this would require policy focused on human behavior such as reproduction, sex education, or access to contraception. Western bias that prioritizes technology over social change and fears its' own shameful history of eugenics struggle to acknowledge the impact of population on climate change. This paper considers how Eastern countries have engaged with this issue, while the United States has avoided it. It will consider how certain cultures' way of thinking and knowing about sexuality impact the policy they pass on environmental issues. Specifically, China's one-child policy, though deeply flawed, responded to important environmental issues that Western biases and norms inhibited the U.S. from considering.

Introduction:

Overpopulation and human consumption are having a detrimental impact on the environment. The current rate of reproduction and consumption are rapidly draining the earth of its' natural resources (Speidel et. al, 2009). Fossil fuel supplies are depleted, and current clean energy alternatives are nowhere near effective or resourceful enough to compensate. Turning to biofuel will only further weaken our ecosystem, inevitably creating greater scarcity of food and eventually challenging our very livelihood (Zehner, 2012). In short, there are too many humans using too much energy and not enough is being done to address it.

Currently, no country in the world can provide basic needs to all of its' citizens at a globally sustainable rate (Cullingford, 2019). This impact is intensified by the growing number of people on the planet and unnecessarily worsened by the millions of unwanted babies born each year due to limited access to contraception and abortion (Speidel et. al, 2009). Since 2015, there have been approximately 121 million unintended pregnancies each year. This accounts for almost 48% of global pregnancies (Bearak et. al, 2020). With this significant number, and the proven success of family-planning programs in diminishing unplanned pregnancy (Speidel et. al, 2009), it is not surprising that environmentalists have often advocated for social change reforms that include family planning services and women's rights (Zehner, 2011). Still, the United States, and many of its' Western counterparts, prioritize clean energy policies over social change initiatives in their environmental programs (Zehner, 2012). However, several non-Western countries have addressed the human-caused depletion of resources with far more explicit intentions.

Countries like Costa Rica, Iran, and Thailand have found success in cutting their rates of reproduction in half through fertility education and increased access to contraception (Zehner,

2011). Vietnam instituted a two-child policy to limit population growth and encourage women to return to the workforce (Ngo, 2019). While these milder attempts proved effective in their own right, China took the approach even further and passed a one-child policy. This paper will consider how the cultural subjectivity of humans' sexuality and reproduction inform these drastically different responses to overpopulation and human consumption, with specific attention to China's one-child policy and America's reaction to it.

Different Ways of Knowing

This comparison is best framed by first understanding how culture impacts our way of knowing. Sexual behavior and ideology are subjective, interacting with and deriving meaning from culture (Vance, 2007). As a result, different cultures have unique ontologies that trickle down into the way individuals formulate their values about sexual behavior and reproduction. Thus, one country might view a public policy that restricts procreation as barbaric while another may see it as supporting their community values. This is precisely what occurred among public commentaries from America and China regarding China's one-child policy (Cullingford, 2019). While Western cultural values admonish the idea of forced population controls (Potts, 2006), collectivist Eastern ideologies prioritize the importance of community needs (Engebretsen, 2009), such as consuming less resources, over personal preferences.

However, these different ways of attempting to solve issues are grounded in values that often go unexposed to other ideologies. Cultures that believe themselves to hold superior knowledge, as most do, are limited in their access to other ways of knowing or thinking about a problem (Blaser & de la Cadena, 2018). As a single culture's ontologies become more pervasive in their own discourse and research, their lens is reiterated and further validated. As a result, their

perspective gains even greater confidence and certainty, and more seamlessly overlooks alternative concepts and ways of knowing (Blaser & de la Cadena, 2018) that other cultures may have engaged with.

Thus, China, a collectivist society that values kinships and stability (Engebretsen, 2009) and is historically comfortable with political intervention on social issues (Rofel, 2007), has defined the problem as a societal issue and therefore engaged in people-centered approaches to overpopulation and overconsumption. Alternatively, the United States', an individualist society that prioritizes individual rights over society's best interests (Potts, 2006), has prioritized climate change as an energy-based scientific issue (Zehner, 2012), largely dismissing individual behavior and prioritizing technological solutions. Each culture pursues their own solutions based on the unique societal construction of the problem. As Vance (2007) similarly philosophizes about the role of social constructionism on our personal sexual preferences, culture allows humans to think about their sexuality in drastically different ways. For, it is through public discourse that sexual behaviors or choices gain meaning (Rofel, 2007). With this in mind, could reproduction, one of the most defining pieces of our Western sexual selves, be considered selfish or problematic if another culture deems it so?

China's One-Child Policy

China's one-child policy commenced in 1979 with the intention to control the rate of population growth and maintain resource availability for Chinese citizens (Potts, 2006). Though reversed in 2015 (Wang et. al, 2016), it remained an active policy in China for nearly four decades. This is not the first time Chinese government involved itself in the sexual lives of its' citizens and imparted their sexual values through policy. In fact, government campaigns have

historically politicized sexual behavior and family planning to promote their ideal sexual citizenship (Engebretsen, 2009), including the “later, longer, fewer” birth planning campaign implemented prior to the passing of the one child policy (Whyte et. al, 2015). Though widely acknowledged to be coercive in nature, the political background and collectivist mindset of China provided space for such policies to be accepted by the public.

Historically, social politics in China have often given meaning to its’ citizens lives. Through decades of Maoism and China’s cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, many Chinese individuals viewed social policies as freeing and increasing access to exercise control over their own lives (Rofel, 2007). It is therefore unsurprising that the one-child policy, passed on the heels of the revolution, was received with acceptance and understanding by much of China (Cullingford, 2019). Rofel (2007a), a researcher in China during the 1980s, noted an implicit relationship between people’s individual passions and government campaigns, as well as a conscious awareness of how deeply policies impact their social lives. For example, because of the relationship between political ideals and personal choice, abortion is not viewed as murderous (Cullingford, 2019) but as a normative sexual behavior in Chinese culture.

Perhaps as a result of this political backdrop, most Chinese people supported the one-child policy and inevitably aligned their values and preferences with those of the policy. In fact, when the policy was updated to allow two children instead of one, a majority of Chinese families continued having one child. This is not particularly surprising, given the frequent overlap and indistinguishable nature of personal preference and politics in China (Rofel, 2007). Thus, Chinese culture’s prioritization of stability across political, cultural, and social arenas has repeatedly made space for government regulation of its’ citizens’ lives (Engebretsen, 2009).

The ease of implementation of this policy speaks to the cultural lens of China but did not necessarily translate to the success of the policy. Many opposed to the policy argued a two-child policy could have resulted in similar changes with far less trauma (Whyte et. al, 2015) and point to the de-humanizing, human rights violations that occurred as a result of it (Wang et. al, 2016). Critics also note the gendered issues of the policy, as there was a tendency for parents to favor boys and abort female fetuses or kill female babies (Potts, 2006). Also, while supporters say the policy prevented 400 million births, others suggest China's economic burst in the 1980s would have naturally limited birth rates as income and education levels rose (Whyte et. al, 2015).

Alternatively, the one-child policy has also been revered for its' bold proactivity. In fact, a 2014 report in *The Economist* ranked the policy as the fourth most important contribution to curbing greenhouse gas emissions in recent decades (Whyte et. al, 2015). The approximate 1.5 decline in fertility rate is argued to have freed up 24% more resources for families and national investments (Potts, 2006). With this in mind, we can reflect on how Western countries' dismissal of the policy may have led them to miss the strengths in China's alternative way of thinking about the environmental crisis.

The one-child policy was often viewed by the West as problematic, controlling, and barbaric. It is rarely noted for its' attempt to positively contribute to the planet, despite its' environmental, consumption-reduction intentions (Cullingford 2019). The stark moral judgement placed upon the policy likely inhibited other countries from considering the advantages of China's approach. By judging the ethical issues of the policy from a Western lens, foreign leaders missed the normative nature of the policy within Chinese politics and among Chinese people. Additionally, it distracted other countries from looking at the crux of the policy and considering how public policy could shift individual citizens' impact on the environment.

Though China has integrated Western practices of materialism and technological advance into its' collectivist traditions, the informational flow has not been as strong in the opposite direction (Rofel, 2007). Not only does this shed light on global power dynamics, it also acknowledges the ease of dismissing the one-child policy as substandard and inhumane by the hegemonic West.

Of course, it is arguable that China's collectivism is helped by the Foucauldian nature of its' government (Cullingford, 2019) and its' long history of biopower over Chinese citizens (Whyte et. al, 2015). And yet, 26 years after the passing of the policy, in 2006, all social classes and age groups reportedly preferred two or less children (Potts, 2006). China, perhaps more than other countries, experiences a multidirectional impact between inner self and social values, and public arenas and government policy (Rofel, 2007a). It would be impossible to know whether public or private desires maintain the collectivist mindset present today, but it is clear that this very mindset is integral to the political regulation of sexual policy in China.

The Western Dilemma

Alternatively, the United States' political and societal mindset has led to individual behavior being largely dismissed in environmental policy. Instead of challenging the causes of the growing energy emergency, such as limited public transportation or lack of contraception accessibility, the U.S. has prioritized alternative energy technologies to offset human impact on the planet (Zehner, 2012). In other words, the U.S. is more concerned with creating clean energy than actually limiting energy usage. This is indicative of America's neoliberal framework, noted in its' general avoidance to provide comprehensive social policies, such as national paid maternity leave and universal healthcare (Budig et. al, 2016).

Thus, it is unsurprising that the United States government website reports no official population policy, citing "the 'ideal' family size should be determined by the desires of couples, not

governments” (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, n.d.). More so, growth is as ingrained in American culture as the country’s flag. Much of American society relies on economic progress, heightened consumerism, and population expansion. More people in the country allows for more sales, increased workforce, and greater economic growth (Zehner, 2012). While collectivist countries might prioritize the greater good of its’ citizens, many Western governments work with corporations to increase profit margins under the public presumption that they are serving the society at large (Blaser & de la Cadena). This approach simply does not serve all American citizens and thus begs the question of whose best interest is truly being considered.

While environmentalist and reproductive health advocates in the U.S. continue to fight for the importance of sexual and women’s rights to offset the growing energy crisis, they face backlash and general dismissal of population growth conversations (Speidel et. al, 2009). Again, the American prioritization of individual rights over societal gain (Cullingford, 2019) has been a point of contention, keep conversations about population concerns largely off limits. In fact, there are even major environmental groups that refuse to acknowledge the relationship between population growth and resource depletion (Speidel et. al, 2009). Their fear of raising the topic, though inexplicably unproductive, is not irrational.

Fierce criticism and threats of retribution come from both sides of the political spectrum. The very concept of population control is interpreted to challenge the feminist, pro-choice issue of having autonomy over one’s body. Similarly, it also risks othering poor, non-white women in America as previous (Cullingford, 2019) population reforms have done (Zehner, 2012). On the other hand, religious groups (Speidel et. al, 2009), political conservatives, and pro-choice

constituencies have repeatedly advocated against abortion, dismissed the importance of contraception, and supported abstinence only sex education (Cullingford, 2019).

Like many country's politics, including China, there is much hypocrisy in this argument. It was only in the 1970s, when strategists lobbied to evangelical voters to side with Catholics and vote against abortion, that abortion became an American political ideal. Since then, anti-abortion platforms have proved prominent among conservative political platforms. Interestingly, China's one-child policy has been effectively weaponized by anti-abortion advocates in the U.S. to build support for their cause, even after the policy was abolished (Cullingford, 2019). It has similarly been used by democrats, including Hillary Clinton, to support women's rights and bodily autonomy (Cullingford, 2019). The explicit demonization of China's one-child policy perhaps highlights just how dismissive the U.S. was of the reasoning for such a policy. With different reasons for different groups, addressing the ramifications of population growth is simply not within the American framework.

Aligned with this individualist mindset and further dismissing the opportunity for expanded environmental policy is Western cultures' limited prioritization of the environment. Hegemonic opinion tends to believe nature is simply nature, barely inanimate, and scarcely deserving more than just existing (Blaser & de la Cadena, 2018). This lacking consideration, along with America's general avoidance of digging deeper into the root of the problem, leads to many efforts intending to save the planet actually destroying it.

It is arguable that the United States has simply taken a different approach to resolving the deterioration of natural resources. However, unlike China's one-child policy which funneled into the global economy but primarily impacted its' own citizens, the choices the U.S. makes directly impact the planet as a whole. Developed and wealthy nations consume more energy, waste more

resources, and are more likely to breed children who do the same (Zehner, 2012). The U.S. is one of the worst offenders (Speidel et. al, 2009). As a result, their negative impacts on greenhouse gases and energy waste are far more impactful than those of underdeveloped countries (Zehner, 2012).

Conclusion & Considerations:

This is not an argument for or against child limitation policies. Nor is it meant to decide whether China's one-child policy was ethical, effective, or worth repeating. Both are far greater questions than this paper allows for. Rather, it is a call to consider what we miss by insulating our knowledge in Western ideologies, without consideration for what our own value system might be missing. In short, Western conceptualization of sexuality and identity are not universal (Engebretsen, 2009) and it does not serve the greater global population to presume that they are. This is true for many areas of sexual study and policy, but especially when it comes to environmentalism. Because of the complex nature and multi-layered causes for the current rate of resource depletion, there is no smoking gun solution. Any and all attempts to curb energy use should, at the very least, be thoughtfully considered.

China did not pursue the traditional, normative path that many Western countries do (Rofel, 2007a) and were able to see solutions that would never have presented itself as an option to the United States. Clearly, their solution was imperfect and flawed. However, with less Western critique and a more open-minded analysis, the Western world could have taken useful notes away from the one-child policy to apply to their own societies in more effective ways. While the U.S. has contributed important research about the realistic boundaries of clean energy, its' sexual norms inhibit the majority of government actors from looking beyond technology and

into our individual lifestyles for alternative energy solutions. What might the U.S. be able to engage in if they zoomed out from their own way of knowing about energy and individual rights?

As Betsy Hartmann, director of the Population and Development Program at Hampshire College, eloquently noted, “take care of the population and population growth will come down” (Zehner, 2012, pg. 211). By failing to look outside of itself, many Western cultures miss the connection between supporting its’ citizens and environmental change. Increased sexual rights including and beyond reproductive justice, such as health care, work-family policy, HIV/AIDS prevention, and education are just as necessary to managing energy waste and slowing the rate of reproduction (Zehner, 2012). In many ways, they are a package deal. Women’s rights are no exception and perhaps most important to focus on, as educating and empowering women naturally reduces the birth rate, regardless of the culture or country (Cullingford, 2019).

The dismissal of these issues in the rooms of many environmental strategists is deeply alarming, but not unique to the U.S. Around the world, women are denied access to autonomy over their own bodies by policy, husbands, religious leaders, and even doctors (Zehner, 2012). Without more attention to supporting human life, it would be nearly impossible to heal the damage caused to the planet. Countries around the globe would benefit from an indirect approach to population policy (Wang et. al, 2016) that de-centers limiting procreation and prioritizes the social systems in which populations, and humans, thrive.

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