



Review Paper

Neo-liberalists ‘Straw man’ diversion on Overconsumption-Does the real threat is Overpopulation or Overconsumption?

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Abstract

The Ideas of ‘overpopulation’ and ‘overconsumption’ have been contested among development and environmental scholars for decades. Various institutions, scholars and mainstream Medias, especially from the west, argue that the reason for the shortage of sufficient resources, poverty and environmental degradation in the developing world is mainly due to the number of population they have, not as a result of neo-liberalism. In reaction to this, others argue it is the ‘egoistic, anthropocentric, capitalist ideology and unwise anti-nature pattern of consumption’ of the west is the utmost cause for the problems that the third world countries are facing these days. Claiming that ‘overpopulation’ is real cause for the problems of third world countries, while in fact is not, can be termed as the act of ‘scapegoating’ -i.e. overpopulation bears the blame for overconsumption. Accordingly, the writer, after entertaining the opposite arguments, concludes that ‘overpopulation’ is not the real threat to the natural environment, and is not the main cause for poverty and environmental degradation in the developing countries.

Keywords: Environmental Degradation, Neo-liberalism, Overconsumption, Overpopulation, Third world countries, Poverty, Scapegoating.

Introduction

There have been a lot of debates on overpopulation (or the “population explosion”) vis-a-vis over consumption in relation to environment, poverty, resource exploitation and development. Although, social scientists agree that overpopulation is not as much as a cause of environmental destruction, poverty, resource exploitation or development, there is no universal agreement on this issue. Neo-Malthusians, for instance, argue that the sum total of human activity (i.e. energy, food and resource consumption) results in a greater damage on the environment¹. Malthus, who is one of the prominent advocators of this position in the late 18th century and earlier 19th century, claim that overpopulation is the imminent danger in relation to food supply. He insist that “population grows geometrically, while food supply increased at a geometric rate².” Worst of all, some of the most respected scholars of our days are in favour of this position. For instance Stephen Hawking and David Attenborough, argue that the fight for environmental degradation wouldn’t be successful unless we do something that limits population growth³.

Contrary to these claims, many scholars, academicians and environmental activists argue that over population is a ‘myth.’ They pointed out that the real problem is not rooted on the number of human population. Rather, the problem is within the unfair and unjust neoliberal system itself. In other words, Neo-liberalists take the problem of overpopulation to conceal / or

hide the problems within the capitalist system so that they can easily divert peoples’ attention from the looking at the problems within the capital system to overpopulation. This kind of accusation can be termed as- “scapegoating.”⁴ By the same token,

...[T]he population question as a ‘scapegoat’...a fantasmatic construction concealing the gap between the symbolic order of international development and its persistent failure in practice...and therefore overflowing their Third World confines to threaten the security – and enjoyment – of wealthier nations, the overpopulation bogeyman helps to displace attention from systemic issues within the political economy of development, namely, the futility of pursuing sustainable development within the context of a neoliberal capitalism that characteristically exacerbates both economic inequality and environmental degradation⁴.

In short, the paper discusses the major debates on overpopulation and overexploitation vis-à-vis the environment, poverty, resource exploitation and development. Besides, the writer argues in favour of overexploitation (overconsumption), and hence disagreeing with those who argue supporting the overpopulation argument. To this end, the paper is divided in to four parts: the first part introduces to the debates; the next section argues in favour of overpopulation, the third part presents a counter argument to overpopulation favouring the overconsumption argument, and, finally, the fourth part presents concluding remarks to the debate.

Argument in favour of Overpopulation

Since Malthus, the theory of the population explosion has been taking as one of the main causes for poverty, resource depletion, and environmental degradations. Those who support this argument claim that the rapid growth rate of population would possibly be beyond the capacity of the planet to satisfy their needs, (i.e. overshoot). The assumption is, “the rapidly increasing population will lead to increased use of natural resources as a means to meet the needs of people around the world².” Two scholars by a name Ehrlich and Holdren come up with a simple ecological equation in the early 1970s⁵ to show the overall impact of human population on the natural environment.

The formula is:
 $I = PAT$

Where: I= [Environmental] Impact, P= Population, A= Affluence, T= Technology.

From the above ecological equation, one can understand that the environmental impact (I) that humans beings can cause on the natural environment is the overall result of the number of human population (P) multiplied by their activities (A) employing various technologies (T). But, the problem with this equation is, the problem of summing up all human activities in to one without differentiating the level of damages that could results in by various human activities. So, the equation needs to be based on population in order to make it in favour of overpopulation.

By the same token:

...In order to detect an impact that is strictly population dependent, the ecological equation tells us that we need to reduce the terms C and T to constants. In other words, for all populations the amount of activity and the level of technology used to accomplish it would have to be similar... Such an activity would have to be relatively uniform across the human species, engaged in by all people to a similar extent regardless of their culture, material wealth or the region in which they live. The supporting technology for the activity would also have to be fairly uniform between different countries or regions, so that a unit of activity would have a similar impact no matter where it was done⁶.

Thus, it is better to substitute (A) by human consumption (C). Now, the formula would be as follows:
 $I = PCT$

Accordingly, the environmental impact of human population is the product of the number of population times their consumption times the level of technology they employ to satisfy their needs.

Malthus in a very radical position—he has been characterized by Marx as “fundamental[ly] mean²”—in fact, he argues that the

poor should be allowed to perish. He argued that they need to decrease their fertility rate and called poor people immoral beings. One of Malthus’ verse on the poor reads as follows:

A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature’s mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. She tells him to be gone, and will quickly execute her own orders, if he do not work on the compassion of some of her guests. If these guests get up and make room for him other intruders immediately appear demanding the same favour...The order and harmony of the feast is disturbed, the plenty that before reigned is changed into scarcity...The guests learn too late their error, in counteracting those strict orders to all intruders, issued by the great mistress of the feast, who, wishing that all her guests should have plenty, and knowing that she could not provide for unlimited numbers, humanely refused to admit fresh comers when her table was already full².

In line with this argument, rapid population, specifically in Sub-Saharan Africa, would have a counter effect in the development of the continent, suggesting policy makers need to incorporate population dynamics and environmental policy to core nation development planes by taking the case of Mozambique and Kenya as a case study to solidify its conclusion⁷.

Argument in favour of Overconsumption

From the other side of the debate, some argue that it is not population explosion, rather the consumption patterns of the people in general (and that of the so called developed world) responsible for global resource depletion, environmental degradation and poverty. To substantiate their claims, they look at the figures that show the uneven distribution of consumption patterns among people from different parts of the world. For example, the USA alone which constitutes of 5% of the world population consumes 24% of the world’s energy⁸. Some other figures have also revealed that over 80% of the world resources are consumed by the North America, European, Japan and Australia which constitutes of 20% of the world’s population; and over 30% of the world energy is consumed by the USA alone. The earth needs 1.5 years to replace or regenerate wastes of one year⁸.

Moreover, the stated countries above and other countries such as Saudi Arabia, Brazil, and China have been criticized in the Paris agreement (2016) for resulting a greater amount of damage in the atmosphere. After series of environmental discussions, an agreement has been signed by 171 countries including China and the USA, which are the most polluters, to which Ethiopia is also put its signature, and ratified the agreement to be part of its environmental laws by the House of People’s Representatives very recently. This indicates, the world is more or less is coming to a point that the utmost cause for environmental degradation

and global warming is that overconsumption, not population dynamics.

Some other figures also reveal that the world population growth rate is decreasing yet the level of poverty and hunger, and environmental degradations are at a greater number than ever before. This indicates that the main problem is not really related to population growth rate. The problem is within the so called neoliberal capitalist system. Neoliberalism uses overpopulation as a reason so as to conceal the problems on neoliberalism's failure to realized real development in the developing countries⁴- It is called this kind of tricky move- "scapegoating"- to blame the other (i.e. overpopulation), which is not the real problem so as to divert people's attention from the real cause for a problem⁴.

In fact the problem is not with overpopulation. The well-known Indian nationalist, Mahatma Gandhi said, "the world have enough resource for all its people, but doesn't have enough resource for the greedy people." The real problem is on the distribution which is closely linked the capitalist system in which a few section of the society controls most of the resource while the majority are under poverty, own nothing/ or less.

Exposing the truth, an environmentalists' blog, in its 2015 report depicted that: The fact is our long term survival on this planet is threatened by overconsumption. It is threatened by us ignoring how unsustainable our lifestyle is, and instead focusing on the number of people. When the question becomes the number, then it is easier to worry about the Congo than Australia. But, if we keep the question on actual consumption

and ecological footprint, then our concern moves towards actually touching on the real issues⁹.

The above environmental blog, brings about the ecological footprint and carrying capacity of the earth is threatening and declaring from time to time¹⁰ (Figure-1). Above all, some figures also reveals that the world population growth rate is decreasing than yet the level of poverty and hunger, and environmental degradations are at a greater number than ever before. This indicates that the main problem is not really related to population growth rate¹¹. According to United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2013), report the average number of children per woman is decreasing from to time. The report reads as follows:

Total fertility in the less developed regions stood at 6.1 children per woman in 1950-1955, and fell sharply during the 1970s to the 1990s, reaching 2.7 children per woman in 2005-2010. Even though total fertility in the less developed regions is still well above that of the more developed regions, it is projected to fall to 2.3 children per women in 2045-2050, narrowing the gap to 0.4 children per women with the more developed regions. Fertility started to fall more recently in the least developed countries (LDCs), only since the 1980s. But a significant decline has taken place since, from 6.6 births per woman in 1980-1985 to 4.2 births per woman in 2010-2015. Under the medium variant, fertility is projected to decline further in LDCs, to an average level of 2.9 children per woman in 2045-2050, which will narrow the fertility gap among all development groups¹¹.

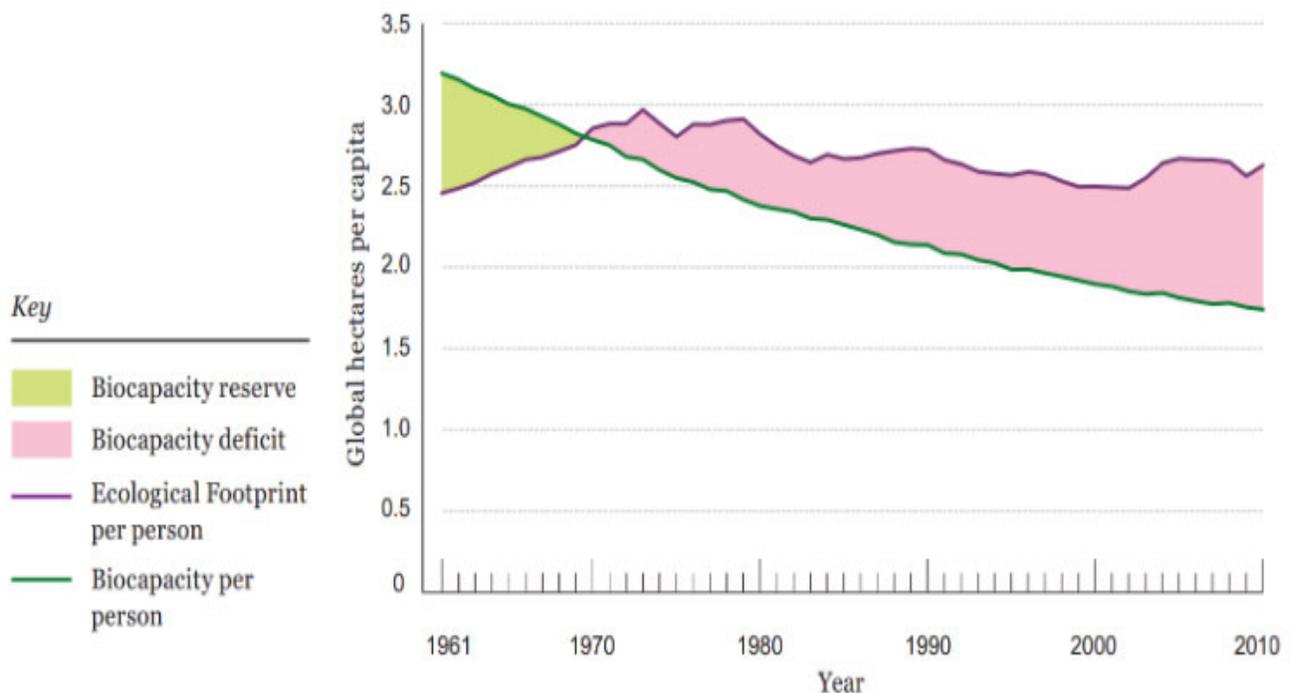


Figure-1: Trends in Ecological footprint and bio-capacity per person between (1961 -2010)¹⁰.

Furthermore, some other reports are also revealing the problem is the unfair, unjust distribution of resources among citizens that resulted from the very nature of capitalism. Based on Oxfam's 2017 Analysis, "eight people are as Wealthy as half the world's population"¹². The multibillionaires are:

Bill Gates: US founder of Microsoft (net worth \$75 billion), Amancio Ortega: Spanish founder of Inditex, Zara fashion chain (net worth \$67 billion), Warren Buffett: US CEO, largest shareholder in Berkshire Hathaway (net worth \$60.8 billion), Carlos Slim Helu: Mexican owner of Grupo Carso (net worth: \$50 billion), Jeff Bezos: US founder, chairman, chief executive of Amazon (net worth: \$45.2 billion), Mark Zuckerberg: US chairman, CEO, co-founder of Facebook (net worth \$44.6 billion), Larry Ellison: US co-founder, CEO of Oracle (net worth \$43.6 billion) and Michael Bloomberg: US founder, owner, CEO of Bloomberg LP (net worth: \$40 billion)¹².

Besides, the amount of fortune controlled by these multibillionaires in reference to the poor half of world population is indicated as follows:

The eight richest people on the planet are worth more than the combined wealth of half the world's population...the eight multibillionaires... have a combined fortune of \$426 billion (£351billion). By contrast half the planet's population, some 3.6billion people, have a combined wealth of \$409 billion (£337billion)¹³.

This indicates the utmost problem is not the raw number of human population. The real problem is the issue of distribution. And, the nature of distribution is the main issue in capitalism. The rich would be richer and richer while the poorer would be poorer and poorer. The gap would be wider and wider. So, it is unsound to argue overpopulation is a threat-this is scapegoating.

Conclusion

The debate on population, consumption vis-à-vis the environment and poverty is so hot and unsettled issue so far. Some argue the sum total of human activities is responsible for poverty, resource depletion and environmental degradation while others argue the real problem is the improper consumption pattern of the west in particular and capitalism in general. To consider population as the real problem is a 'scape goat'-⁴ to concealing the real problem (i.e. to the problem of neo-liberalists capitalistic economic and political thoughts) and bring forth an idea/ thing assuming as the real cause for a thing but not the real cause. Even, some give, Foucault for instance, gave a narrow and racist interpretation to the thought that the poor from developing world should reduce the number of children they have through family planning, contraceptives, abortion any other ways-called all these practices as "acts of genocide" and "eugenic thoughts"¹⁴.

In addition, the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, once responded to the question raised by a member of the House

of People's Representative of the Federal Democratic of Ethiopia about the danger of the increasing number of population of the country as follows:

When a child is born, he/she is not born merely having a stomach that can eat, but he/ she is born with hands that can work, with the mind that can think (Meles's words, translation mine).

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