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Five decades ago, the biologist Paul Ehrlich and his wife Anne Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb*, which alarmed the world with its stern message that the planet was sinking under the weight of the fast multiplying human race. On its fiftieth anniversary, the book is now set for a relaunch in May this year. In the lead up to the relaunch, Paul Ehrlich has again warned of a “near-certain collapse of civilization” if population and overconsumption of resources are left uncurbed. The planet, in his view, is already in excess of 5.6 billion people, while the “optimum population” that it can sustain is 1.5 to 2 billion people. With the publication of *The Population Bomb*,¹ the Ehrlichs arguably became the first potent voice for framing ‘overpopulation’ in ecological terms. But their thesis was derided and even slurred as a continuation of the eugenics movement.² Michelle Murphy, in *The Economization of Life*, passionately and provocatively demonstrates that since the publication of the Ehrlichs’ original work, the western world has in fact been couching the ‘population problem’ in economic terms.

In her treatise, Murphy challenges the privileging of economics over life and decries the economic metrics of who gets to be born and who gets to be unborn. She sees in this metrics “a new calculative figure of devalued or wasteful life to be prevented” (p. 47). This calculus deploys averted birth as “a figure of the better not born, a naming and counting of a better-to-have-never-lived” (p. 47). She presents the U.S. economist Stephen Enke, who shaped family planning policies in the 1960s and 1970s, as a key theorist of the economization of life. Enke argued that money spent for each ‘averted birth’ was 100 times more effective in raising GDP³ per capita than the same amount spent on “productive investments” (p. 47). Murphy reports that Enke’s economic reasoning was so influential with the then United States President Lyndon Johnson that he prioritized funding for family planning over foreign aid for health and food to developing countries. At home, he made family planning a “funded component of his ‘war on poverty.’” Murphy highlights Enke’s obsession with developing nations’ high birth rates, which verges on misanthropy. Enke was of the view that each birth in poor countries detracts from the national economy and that preventing a birth is worth two to six times the per capita GDP.

Measured in economic value, Murphy claims, it is the impoverished, the black, the brown, and the female lives that get averted to make room for their biological and economic betters. This tying of the population to the economy is what Murphy terms the economization of life, which, in her reckoning, has serious implications for ‘reproductive justice.’ She historicizes the very concept of population and traces it to the eugenics movement, which was at its peak in the early twentieth century. She argues that scientists in the late 20th century found the concept of population more palatable than and traded it for ‘race’ (which was a biological category). Yet, she rebuts, population in its reference to “massified life, in the forms of multitudes, crowds, and overpopulation” continues to be a racialized concept. ‘Race’ “is the grammar and ghost of population” (p. 135).

Murphy contests the concept of population for its epistemological framing of life, which she finds “profoundly objectifying and dehumanizing.” In particular, she rejects this concept because “entwined histories of colonialism, governmentality, and capitalism are very much persistent in population as a problem space, manifest in the bodies and places that have had to bear the problem of population” (p. 135). Such connotations of ‘population’ are deeply embedded in its very linguistic construction centuries ago. Tracing its etymology to Latin language, Murphy discovers that the verb ‘to populate’ carries with it a long-forgotten and now archaic meaning: ‘to devastate, to lay waste, to destroy and conquer.’ Murphy concludes that

“the contemporary uses of population as a noun carry this attachment to violence” (p. 135). The noun of population thus presents people as “living forms of waste available for destruction” (p. 135).

The opening vignette of *The Economization of Life* introduces biologist Raymond Pearl, who, in contrast to Stephen Enke, racialized life in his early career as a eugenicist. His research on *Drosophila* (i.e., fruit fly) led him to conclude that population growth rose and fell along an S-curve. At its height, mass death triggers mass decline in population, which causes its growth to curve. Pearl claimed that the S-curve “captured a law of life found in any aggregate of living-beings at any scale: bacteria in a petri dish, *Drosophila* in a bottle, and humans, too, in a city, nation, class or planet” (p. 2). Pearl later shied away from the eugenics movement, not because of its racist or sexist orientations, but because of its inability to measure life in economic value. Eugenics, Murphy writes, made racist claims of “differential life worth based on biological difference and sought selective methods, often violent, to redirect racial futures” (p. 3). On the other hand, what motivated Pearl was not racial futures but ‘economic futures,’ i.e., “how to balance quantitative population with national production, bringing biology and state planning together through ‘economy’” (p. 3). Murphy (dis)credits Pearl with bending the arc of demographic history by presenting “population” as a problem of national and transnational economies. In doing so, he made a departure from questions of ‘racial fitness’ and ‘Darwinian logics’ to embrace “questions of quantity and especially the rates of birth and death within populations relative to economic conditions” (p. 3). Pearl, in his trajectory from racializing population to economizing life, nevertheless, worked within the ‘Malthusian tradition,’ which, Murphy argues, wedded population to the political economy.

Murphy, thus, builds her argument along a linear path of causation between population, reproduction, economy, and ecology. While constructing this causal chain, she observes that population is assumed to have the potential to trigger change or changes in the subsequent variables of reproduction, economy, and ecology. At times, she refines larger variables into subvariables, only to connect them again with larger aggregates. A case in point is dissecting of reproduction into ‘reproductive choice’ and ‘reproductive justice.’ She then sutures the latter with environmental justice to embed biology in the broader ecological concerns. She, however, suspects that ‘reproductive choice’ will remain an empty boast unless it is accompanied by reproductive and redistributive justice. Here, she diverges from the late 20th century liberal feminism, which celebrates ‘reproductive choice.’ Murphy’s critical contestation of reproductive choice is not meant to dismiss the concept per se. She rather contends that “infrastructures of choice are also central to the history of economization of life and inventive of the very terms of neoliberal governmentality” (p. 139). She feels frustrated that these infrastructures are narrowly built around individual choices, which often result in “the selective minimization of supports for life.” “In the United States and Canada,” she writes, “a deadly racist arrangement of minimized support manifests in high black and indigenous infant mortality rates. Antiblack and anti-indigenous infrastructures distribute killings, overpolicing, incarceration, toxic exposures, inadequate housing amid the exuberance of individualized choice and commodity spectacle” (pp. 139-140). She is at her best in connecting these dots and making these connections.

Some may not read, in *The Economization of Life*, a nuanced account of population, or that of past and present strategies to curb it. At the same time, the work is minutely detailed and substantially documented, with the notes and bibliography running as long as to 65 pages. For almost every page of writing, there is a page of documentation. Any rigorous analyst will stand in awe of this publication and its daring approach to a highly sensitive issue of our time. Yet it is

apt to say that Murphy has overspent her energy treading an overtrodden path of dismissing concerns over population as an echo of the “racist, classicist, sexist and eugenicist past.” The question that remains unanswered is how and why planning the population to its economic and ecological context amounts to its devaluing. More recent evidence suggests such planning can be effective. A case in point is China, whose one-child policy, among others, has lifted 800 million Chinese from abject poverty⁴ to middle-class prosperity since the 1990s. This policy has encompassed all classes and genders but spared racial, ethnic, and religious minorities and poor farmers in rural areas. Nor was China prodded by ‘racist, classicist, sexist, or eugenicist westerners’ to enforce the one-child policy, as in Murphy’s empirical case of Bangladesh. If anything, almost all the western world was critical of China’s enforced reproductive control.

Given the looming ecological crisis, it is all the more urgent that the world agrees to what Paul Ehrlich calls the ‘optimum population’ for the only habitable planet, which is meant for all creation, not just the ‘crown jewel of creation.’ Disregarding non-human life is nothing but anthropocentric chauvinism or speciation at worst. That said, Michelle Murphy is at her most persuasive in foreseeing that curbing population alone will not work unless it accompanies redistributive justice, which can be the best contraceptive. For this reason, *The Economization of Life* is a long overdue and heartily welcome addition to an overcrowded field of study – demography and its history. It handily ranks among the top ten books ever written on the subject – from Thomas Malthus to Paul and Anne Ehrlich.

Notes

¹ Paul and Anne Ehrlich have now retitled their book *Population, Resources and the Environment*.

² “Paul Ehrlich: Collapse of civilization is a near certainty within decades.” *Guardian*, London, March 22, 2018.

³ GDP refers to gross domestic product, i.e., the annual value of the goods and services produced in a given nation.

⁴ See, World Bank Overview of China, March 28, 2018 [<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>].

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