

MATTHEW CONNELLY

*Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population\**

Review Symposium: Review by Malcolm Potts

Matthew Connelly's *Fatal Misconception* is a paradox. It provides a dangerously misleading description of the history of international family planning programs in the twentieth century. Connelly has been industrious in his research, however, and in the process he has illuminated, albeit unintentionally, one of the core intellectual issues in international family planning that over time scarred governmental efforts to slow population growth.

History is a vital discipline for anyone interested in population and development. A true historian invites the reader to enter the world of the past he or she has recreated in vivid detail. The history—warts and all—of the struggle of women to control whether and when to have a child is one of the most important stories of the twentieth century. The Victorian inability to handle sex, except to condemn it as sinful, stymied research into contraception and burdened the West and its colonies with anticontraceptive and antiabortion laws. As late as 1950, the best any Western nation had were “rubber goods” sold in seedy shops, clumsy vaginal diaphragms, and withdrawal—all inevitably backed up by abortion, although the operation was still illegal. Predictably the few brave family planning pioneers who began to overcome millennia of patriarchal control of women's fertility were a feisty, sometimes eccentric lot.

Connelly recognizes that the prime responsibility of a historian is “imagining oneself in the place of another,” yet he studiously avoids recreating the world in which his principal actors lived and moved. Instead of documenting and recreating a rich and fascinating world, he vacuums up facts and idiosyncratic personal interpretations of history to support his personal ideology. The early chapters of *Fatal Misconception* are reminiscent of the testimony of the UFO zealot who interprets every wisp of information as evidence of extraterrestrial invasions. Connelly's favorite flying saucer is “population control.” He spies it several times on every page. The aliens he invents to frighten his readers are all those who ever worked in international family planning, whom he invariably portrays as eugenicists, often only one step removed from Nazi Germany.

In the 1950s, the distinguished British historian Sir Herbert Butterfield wrote, “The greatest menace to our civilization today is the conflict between giant organized systems of self-righteousness—each system only too delighted to find that the other is wicked—each only too glad that the sins give it the pretext for still deeper hatred and animosity.” It would make an insightful description of *Fatal Misconception*. Connelly fails to capture a world where most married women worried whether they would see their period this month. Instead, he trawls the writings of pioneers in family planning and the minutes of international family planning meetings and conferences, but denies any voice to the tens of millions of women these brave pioneers were trying to help.

The index of *Fatal Misconception* omits any mention of the 1965 Supreme Court decision on *Griswold v. Connecticut* striking down a statute which stated that “Any

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person who uses any drug, medicinal article or instrument for the purpose of preventing conception shall be fined not less than fifty dollars or imprisoned not less than sixty days...." To omit this landmark case is like writing a history of World War II and omitting Stalingrad. There are 150 entries on "eugenics." Eugenics is from the Greek for "good birth," and a good birth is every pregnant woman's wish. Eugenics was part of the intellectual furniture of the early twentieth century, until a German corporal perverted it for his own obscene ends. There is no index entry on the unmet need for family planning. The one overriding theme and passion of those physicians, such as Alan Guttmacher, who were leaders in international family planning was to reduce the suffering they saw every day as they cared for victims of unsafe abortions that women had undergone in desperation.

Sometimes Connelly's delight in finding "that the other is wicked" verges on the comic. He describes the International Planned Parenthood Federation's Central Office in London in the 1950s as "a gigantic switchboard" plotting to control the world's population. I visited that office many times and they were lucky if they had five phones. International calls were prohibitively expensive in the 1950s. The portrayal is ludicrous. A good example of how Connelly misunderstands his material is his treatment of the work of Sam Keeny. Keeny had played a major role in UN Relief and Rehabilitation (UNRRA) after World War II. A Quaker history calls him a "warm hearted, friendly man." From 1950 to 1963 he was regional director of the East Asia office of UNICEF, where he organized "millions of tons" of food relief, and he played a major part in the development of public health programs in the region. He joined the Population Council and helped create highly successful family planning programs in Taiwan and elsewhere. Connelly picks up the fact that Keeny opposed the integration of family planning with maternal and child health and implies he was some sort of population control fiend. Keeny opposed the integration of family planning and MCH not because his zeal for population control trumped the welfare of children, but because he knew that in resource-poor settings, integration doesn't work logistically. To imply that those with field experience were only interested in "population control" is hugely misleading. The real difference is between the pragmatists who wanted to use limited resources to get the maximum benefit to the maximum number of people and idealists who sought to implement holistic, integrated programs that all too often work only on a small scale. It is a policy conflict running through much of international development. It has nothing whatsoever to do with "population control," eugenics, or Nazi philosophies. A genuine historian would have delved a little deeper rather than searching for scraps of information to support his "system of self-righteousness."

Connelly's goal is to make any uninformed reader despise anyone who worked in international family planning, such as the charismatic and energetic General Bill Draper. Draper, who played a key role in the genesis and funding of the UNFPA, is pilloried as a population control zealot. In fact, he once said, "Population control may be the wrong word. It's a population problem and a population explosion and the question is what to do about it." Draper became interested in population growth when President Eisenhower asked him to chair the 1958 Committee on Foreign Aid, Military Aid and Economic Aid. Looking back on that experience near the end of his life, he wrote, "The whole purpose of economic foreign aid was to improve the lot of

the individual members of society, especially down at the bottom and to improve per capita income. So if the population increase was offsetting any gain in a particular economy, and dividing it into that many more pieces, the only way to help was to cut down on the growth rate of the population, on a voluntary basis."

The paradox of *Fatal Misconception* is that the sheer volume of research Connelly undertakes actually produces some useful historical vignettes. Late in his book Connelly provides a useful summary of some of the maneuvering behind the 1994 Cairo United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). He accepts hook, line, and sinker the myth that everything prior to Cairo was a coercive effort to order women to have fewer children than they really wanted. But Connelly's research helps clarify the origin of the coercive family planning policies that arose in the 1970s and 1980s in Asia.

Fifty years ago demographers were awash with data on socioeconomic correlates of fertility decline, but were unable to identify what people used in their bedrooms, or the abortions they had in the back streets. Not surprisingly, they espoused an explanation of the demographic transition that was driven by external socioeconomic change, such as increases in wealth and literacy. Improvements in education are everyone's priority, but education is not a prerequisite for adopting family planning. If it were, the world would be in a sorry state. Today, just to hold school class size constant, the developing world must train and deploy 2 million extra teachers annually—something it is not able to do. It is access to modern contraception and safe abortion that explains why the 2007 Bangladesh DHS shows that two large districts with millions of poor, often illiterate women now have replacement-level fertility. Demographers are surprised that Addis Ababa, not an affluent city, now has below-replacement fertility. It is because women there have been able to get safe abortions, linked to good postabortion contraceptive advice, for several years.

Clearly, some policymakers in the 1950s and 1960s were confused about what to do. Some people did come up with desperate and sometimes unacceptable solutions. In the 1960s the United States was shipping millions of tons of grain to India to prevent famine. In India upper-caste bureaucrats did not believe lower-caste people wanted fewer children. Once one adopts Connelly's mistaken conclusion that "[t]he only factor that has consistently and convincingly been found to correlate with lower fertility is increasing women's education" (p. 23), then one is left with either doing nothing to slow rapid population growth and watching a Malthusian disaster unfold, or coercing illiterate women to have fewer children.

Had Prime Minister Indira Gandhi known the real power of voluntary family planning—the combination of modern contraception and safe abortion Connelly dismisses at every opportunity—her government would not have gone down such a sad and disastrous road. Connelly quotes a paper by Kingsley Davis in the very first issue of *Population and Development Review* in 1975. Davis, who was professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, and president of the Population Association of America in 1962, concluded that "the only force capable of managing population growth appears to be a strong government." He went on to forecast the need for "a totalitarian government...ruling a docile mass of semi-educated but thoroughly indoctrinated urbanites...accepting passively what is provided for them" (Davis 1975: 83).

Davis was not a neo-Nazi eugenicist, but he did not believe that offering voluntary family planning to poor and illiterate populations would have any impact on population growth. That did not mean, as Connelly implies, that Davis endorsed the coercive family planning programs being adopted at the time in India. However, the model he adopted for the demographic transition did frame population growth as insoluble by voluntary means in poor and illiterate societies, such as much of India. Davis's 1967 article in *Science*, where he labeled family planning as a solution to population growth as "quackery" and "wishful thinking," brought unwarranted political criticism of Dr. Rei Ravenholt, who, as head of population at USAID believed that offering voluntary family planning was sufficient to lower family size—a policy that history showed to be correct.

The ultimate tragedy is that the type of idealism at Cairo that Connelly applauds so uncritically has actually left women worse off. After Cairo, budgets for contraception collapsed and large-scale family planning was replaced by numerous token projects in the much broader field of sexual and reproductive health. Sam Keeny was right: it is difficult to integrate family planning and MCH. More women are dying in childbirth today than in 1994. Since Cairo, in Africa, the total fertility rate and the unmet need for family planning of the lowest economic quintiles have risen and the inequities between rich and poor have widened (Campbell et al. 2007)—the latter trend inevitably translates into less education and more ill health for the poor. Already, Connelly's "pretext for still deeper hatred" has been used by *The Economist* to undermine international family planning at the very time that thoughtful policy-makers are realizing the need for greater emphasis on slowing population growth.

Social change is a slow, difficult process and little progress has been made on such ICPD and Millennium Development Goals as improving education for women and reducing domestic violence. Fortunately, a highly efficacious technology such as modern contraception backed by safe abortion can help overcome socioeconomic disparities. Connelly needs to learn that idealism, however well-intentioned and however passionate, does not save lives and does not make the world a better place. What worries me is that a new generation of committed, inspiring students and young professionals who did not have the experience of traveling with Bill Draper, of witnessing Alan Guttmacher's empathy for women in an abortion ward in Bangladesh, or of listening to Rei Ravenholt plan ways to bring family planning to tens of millions of women whose voices had never been heard before will be misled by a long book with many citations, and not recognize it for what it really is—a caricature of one of the twentieth century's most important historical episodes.

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MATTHEW CONNELLY

*Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population\**

Review Symposium: Review by Dennis Hodgson

*Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* is an exceptional piece of research that is well written and very difficult to put down. Matthew Connelly presents the rise and fall of a “globe-spanning movement to shape demographic trends” (p. 18) that began in the 1870s and ceased in 1994 at the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. He contends that all its various “population controllers” were guided by a “fatal misconception,” a belief that they “could know other people’s interests better than they knew it themselves” (p. 378). I found myself reading this history with one finger back in the Notes section and constantly flipping back and forth to see where the interesting quotes were coming from. We owe a debt of gratitude to Connelly for the broad scope of the sources he examined and for his great diligence in unearthing insightful nuggets from rarely examined archives. Those who think of themselves as demographers will benefit from reading this book, if only for the exposure it gives to events from our disciplinary past. During the decades when demography was establishing itself as an academic discipline, demographers shared many ties with the international population control movement, from common sources of institutional support to a substantial overlap in personnel. The fledgling discipline was itself a small policy-oriented entity with some characteristics of a social movement, and this page-turner does an admirable job of documenting its past ties to eugenics and other movements that many of us might now prefer to ignore.

While I found *Fatal Misconception* difficult to put down, I also found it difficult to fully embrace. Perhaps this is because my ideal historian is someone who is a bit detached from the subject at hand and strives to assume an objective stance. Connelly does not want to be that kind of historian. He takes strong value positions and he doesn’t conceal his advocacy of them. The reader opens the book and finds it dedicated “To my parents, for having so many children” and immediately knows that the author is going to be suspicious of those who believe that large families, or overpopulation, or high rates of population growth ever constituted human problems, and that he, the youngest of eight children, will be wary of any movement that worked to induce couples to adopt a small-family norm. He believes in a strong version of reproductive rights, that every reproductive decision ought to be freely made by the woman who is deciding whether or when to bear a child. And he wants to write history from the bottom up, from the viewpoint of the powerless in every situation: the woman in a patriarchal family, the poor in a society, the colony in a colonial system, and the peripheral society in a hegemonic world system. I’m not opposed to these value positions, and it certainly is helpful for the reader to know where the author is coming from. But did Connelly’s strong value positions shape the history that he presents? My assessment is that it did have some impact on the content of the story. I also think it had an impact on his presentation of “demographic facts,” and certainly on the “lessons of history” arrived at in the conclusion.

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An example of such an impact can be found in the first chapter, where one notices that the author conflates a large number of distinct population movements into one “global population control movement.” Connelly defines “population control” to include any attempt to influence the demographic behavior of others. So “population controllers” include nationalistic pronatalists, antinatalist neo-Malthusians, immigration restrictionists, eugenicists, sex-reforming birth controllers, and even those who might not respond decisively enough to a famine situation. I remember asking myself whether a global population control movement, so broadly defined, ever really existed. One might have to be an advocate of the powerless who is suspicious of every attempt to shape populations to see such a unified movement. So *Fatal Misconception* might be a history of a movement whose very existence many will dispute. I also was surprised by who didn’t make it into Connelly’s large list of population controllers, especially since the 1870s was identified as the decade when this movement began. Where are Horatio Storer and his anti-abortion movement and Anthony Comstock with his anti-contraception movement? Why didn’t movements that successfully criminalized both birth control and abortion make it into this history? Perhaps it is because these movements were attempting to control the fertility of “elites” in a developed society, targeting middle- and upper-class women who even by this time had quite low fertility.

The examination of the post-World War II international population control movement, a movement that all will admit was real and had a consciously defined goal of reducing rapid population growth in still-agrarian societies, is the centerpiece of this history. And Connelly produces powerful evidence that morally questionable actions were undertaken by movement advocates. He documents, for instance, that President Lyndon Johnson withheld food aid during a famine until India adopted a more vigorous family planning effort, one that included uninformed women being fitted with problematic IUDs by individuals who knew that many of these women would not be able to receive needed medical attention if infections developed. All readers will be repelled by such actions, especially since Connelly so clearly disputes that any need ever existed to lower these populations’ fertility in the first place. For such a disbeliever in the population problem there is a great temptation to question what must actually have motivated population controllers, a temptation to which Connelly has succumbed. For instance, there is no doubt, especially now with the extensive documentation of this work, that some participants in this movement engaged in eugenic thinking. But was eugenics really the core concern of this movement? There is also no doubt that some desired to forestall political upheaval in a decolonizing world. But were these family planners really the shock troops of a neocolonial movement to keep oppressed peoples down? Were Scandinavian governments, the Population Council, and the International Planned Parenthood Federation really attempting to usher in a new age of imperialism?

Movement advocates, especially the demographers involved, claimed to be motivated by largely humanitarian concerns. They were disconcerted by the unprecedented rates of population growth that arose after World War II from the sudden implementation of very effective death control techniques throughout much of the world. This entire generation of demographers agreed that fertility decline would occur if populations would modernize: change their economic structures from agriculture to industry, urbanize, and become literate. But they came to despair that

such modernization would be possible in the face of unprecedented population growth. They did not want to sit aside and wait until this demographic hurdle to modernization was cleared away by the “cleansing effect” of a massive increase in mortality. This generation believed that they were faced with a crisis, and they convinced themselves that the most direct method of inducing fertility decline, making contraceptives available to peasant populations, might work, and that, considering the alternative, it was worth a try. Connelly does an excellent job of depicting what happened when peasant populations were slow to adopt contraception and some movement advocates pushed questionable “beyond family planning” initiatives; these moral tragedies now have the documentation that they deserve. But is it a fair historical account to contend that the population controllers’ crisis was simply a delusion, their worries unfounded, their real motives largely suspect, and their attempts to “mold populations” immoral? This case has yet to be made.

Connelly links together imperialism and population control as a way to see coherence running through the 100-plus years of his global population control movement. During the period after World War II, he contends, this movement was largely an attempt at neocolonialism, aimed at controlling “populations” as opposed to territory. There are problems with such a representation. First, colonial administrations never actively supported family planning programs, even when they had identified population growth as a cause of instability in their territories. Second, there was great reluctance on the part of the US government, the major First World power of the time, to integrate family planning into its foreign aid programs. The movement was established by nongovernmental organizations with key early roles played by Scandinavian governments, ones without much of a colonial legacy. Third, the two most coercive attempts at population control—the forced sterilization campaign of India and China’s one-child policy—happened after the international population control movement had suffered what Connelly calls its “Waterloo” at the Bucharest conference in 1974. The fact is that both India and China were instrumental in bringing about that Waterloo. Additionally, Indian and Chinese leaders undertook their most coercive programs on their own, without the prodding of the major First World population control players. Although Connelly ties the origin of China’s one-child campaign to a reading of the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* volume, this is a very thin thread with which to connect it to the international population control movement. At a minimum, these inconvenient facts indicate that there is a substantial non-neocolonial dimension to much of the fertility control that has taken place over the last 40 years.

Finally, we must consider Connelly’s conclusions. His story is that at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, the reproductive rights movement decisively vanquished the old global population control movement; that the emancipation of women has led to declining fertility throughout the world; and that now “[a]ll over the world there has been a shift in the locus of control in how societies reproduce themselves.” Individuals are deciding for themselves how many children to have “with or without anyone’s help or permission” (p. 381). This seems like an ideal situation, but the author notes that we need to be vigilant. We need to apply the lessons of history and “oppos[e] all manipulative and coercive policies designed to control populations” (p. 383; emphasis in original). This includes vigilance in the face of pressure to adopt new pronatalist policies in societies with below-re-

placement fertility and in the face of a more insidious problem: the “privatization of population control” (p. 382). Private individuals in India, China, and elsewhere, not governments, are deciding to abort female fetuses. These individuals “police themselves” and are “unconsciously reproducing and reinforcing inequality with every generation” (p. 382). We are told that “[t]he struggle against population control has shown that it is never enough to insist on choice. Choices can be conditioned by default or design in ways that lead to new kinds of oppression” (p. 384). What we need for true reproductive freedom is global equality, a world “in which every one of us is conceived in liberty and created equal” (p. 384).

In this discussion of the “privatization of population control,” Connelly finally seems to be admitting that the act of having a child always takes place in a social context or, in Kingsley Davis’s words (1948: 556), that “fertility has always, in every kind of society been socially controlled.” If this is true, then perhaps as we wait for global equality to arrive we should recognize that the social context in which reproductive decisions are being made can change in ways that make the presence or absence of a child a more or less joyful social occasion, and that all attempts to manipulate fertility behavior are not necessarily immoral. In societies that have experienced 30 years of below-replacement fertility, the act of having a child is occurring in a new social context, one in which having a child has become a socially beneficial act that should be socially supported. Why is it necessarily immoral for there to be policy recognition of this changed context? Why is it immoral to put into place programs that would allow women to more easily pursue satisfying careers and have children and that would have the public bear part of the costs of feeding, housing, caring for, and educating a child, simply because these programs are designed to “manipulate” reproductive decisions and allow more children to be born? Is the lesson of history really that all such attempts are wrong? And speaking of demographers, is the lesson of history that demographers never should engage in “population thinking,” never should produce population projections that identify the potentially problematic aspects of current trends, and never should offer population policy suggestions?

While there is no way to inoculate any generation of demographers against the possibility of being so thoroughly infected by the prejudices of the day, or by a sense of crisis surrounding an emerging problem, as to do real moral harm, the answer is not disengagement. There is a more modest lesson to be learned from the ethical missteps that Connelly has so vividly documented. We need to make sure that those making policy for others, including policy-oriented disciplines like demography, avoid living in too small a world. They need to strive for a diverse membership that remains open to questioning basic assumptions. They need to have multiple constituencies, both as sources of support and as audiences for their findings. And they need to perform a valuable social service by fully engaging with the policy challenges of their day. With luck, when their actions have become history, they will find a chronicler who will portray fully the context in which they arrived at their policy recommendations, even though by then the inevitable flaws in their reasoning will be evident for all to see.

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## Reference

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