

Is six billion of us too many?

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Introduction: how many is too many?

Too many people in the Third World, too many foreigners at home, too many women and youth on the job market, and too many retired people for the working population: this commonly heard discourse is as normative as it is extremely incoherent. A significant part of the social debate is polluted by a sort of unconscious push towards shameful solutions that dare not speak their name.

Who doesn't remember the far-right National Front's declaration that two million unemployed people are two million immigrants too many? The same parallel emerges immediately when we are told the planet is overpopulated: where should surplus populations be sent? Should we organize charter flights to Mars, as we do today to African countries? To approach the problem correctly, we need to abandon our irrational ways of thinking and stop viewing the world's population as the root of all evil, or even as a modifiable variable. This is the focus of my book.

First we must at least understand how the Earth's population evolves. The human population has just reached the 6 billion mark, almost at the same time it rang in the year 2000. These two symbolic milestones have given rise to a rather sinister form of neo-Malthusianism, despite a current slowdown in population growth that in fact exceeds expectations. In light of this demographic inertia, it is hard to understand how population growth could be slowed much further without resorting to barbaric methods. In what is now considered the most likely scenario, the world's population will increase by another 50% before stabilizing in the middle of the next century.

Does this mean that we are trapped inside an unstoppable process? Won't this supplementary growth push us to the limit of what the planet can handle and lead to a major catastrophe?

An examination of the notion of limits however reveals the difficulty of establishing a true "green paradigm" centered on the risk of planetary self-destruction. Humans are not tadpoles whose growth is determined by the size of the pond; not only are we far more clever, we also have the potential to be far more destructive. Between inescapable final destruction and unlimited confidence in human intelligence is a happy medium that, for once, is not the least radical of options.

Essentially, population control is based on two basic factors: food and energy. Traditional Malthusianism identifies food supplies as a controlling factor, and it is important to know whether this plays a role today, worsened by irreversible damage to the Earth's soils and to the environment. The second environment-related factor is caused by the link between population size and dangerous emissions, particularly CO². Much can be done to influence these factors. We can in fact envision solutions whereby improved living conditions in developing countries are compatible with greenhouse gas and erosion reduction. Many obstacles line the road to a project that will be difficult to carry out, due to the tendency of capitalist-based economics to lead us elsewhere.

Consequently, the debate on the best possible policies and regulatory tools becomes central issue, one that could be enriched perhaps by the field of political economy. Today's leading economic model, even in its greenest forms, is incapable of crossing the threshold required to find a new way of calculating. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need for a radical transformation of economic rationality to directly handle the "great shift" towards an economical economy and a stable population that...is aging.

Because this is indeed the catch: this considerably increased population has already begun to age. This will undoubtedly be one of the toughest challenges we face in the new century, especially since the overall population could begin to decrease in upcoming decades, and even earlier in certain regions. This drives home the idea that the Earth's equilibrium can only be saved through global means of cooperation that are incompatible with the competitive nature of capitalism. For this reason, the following essay can also be considered as an outline for the debate on sustainable socialism.