

**Review: Should We Control World Population?**

By Diana H. Coole

**Reviewed by Yves Laberge**

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Coole, D. H. *Should We Control World Population?* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018. 140pp, ISBN: 9781509523405, hardcover. \$45.00; also available as an ebook. Note: Part of the Polity Press series, *Political Theory Today*.

The everlasting debate about the overpopulation question seems to reappear from time to time in new forms since Robert Malthus (1766-1834) up to Neo-Malthusianism, and the issues are frequently discussed beyond the restricted circle of experts and demographers. Because this complex topic can feature personal, private, moral, obviously ethical, sometimes religious dimensions, lay observers and some scholars can occasionally take extreme positions. For example, in the last century, noted French agronomist René Dumont wrote a shocking book published in Canada titled *La Contrainte ou la Mort: Lettre aux Québécoises et aux Québécois sur l'avenir de la planète* (*Constraint or Death: Open Letter to Quebeckers About the Future of the Planet*), in which he argued authorities and international funding institutions should impose birth limitation to populations living in poor countries, mainly in Africa, if they want to obtain more international help (see: René Dumont and Gilles Boileau, Éditions Du Méridien, 1990). But in recent years, relatively few experts have suggested coercion for population reduction.

In her fifth book since *Women in Political Theory: From Ancient Misogyny to Contemporary Feminism* (1988), Professor Diana Coole (from Birkbeck, University of London) adds an informed point of view to this debate (p. 96). Firstly, Coole defines population control, not using demographical terms, but rather within the realm of policies: “population control is defined in this book as a policy regime designed to modify fertility trends through deliberate interference in reproductive behaviour, with the aim of influencing demographic outcomes” (p. 4). Interestingly, she notes that “the terminology of ‘population control’ is absent from this contemporary discourse but a goal of ‘population stabilization’ is not” (p. 3).

*Should We Control World Population?* is arranged into three sections, and the last section is by far the most original, with portions drawing from a renewed Foucauldian approach linked to biotechnology and biopolitics to discuss some specific issues, feasibility, and possible consequences of population limitation within a neoliberal conjuncture: incentives, disincentives, social engineering strategies (p. 109). Pro and Con arguments are well-known and can sometimes be reversed and re-used in the

opposed direction, as in this quote: “the birth of a child, perceived as a gain for the single family, imposes costs on all other members of the society in which it is born — costs that are not taken into account in the private decisions that determinate fertility” (Paul Demerey, quoted by Diana Coole, p. 67). Finally, Coole concludes by suggesting helping persons who need and want birth control but have no access or no freedom to do so.

To begin with few quibbles, the book gives the impression of trying at the same time to make a point and to remain objective. In what she admittedly points out as a “highly controversial topic” (p. 6), Coole is not totally neutral and takes position “for” a form of population regulation, that is, reduction. In a way, that option “against” is the main weak point of the title which therefore loses much of its objectivity. In a sense, *Should We Control World Population?* appears like an essay rather than an academic book, but it has nonetheless the advantage of igniting this old debate that will probably be ongoing neverendingly. However, another dimension should be given more attention and is not much considered by Coole: the consequences of the massive migration movements from the Southern hemisphere toward the northern hemisphere, either from Africa toward Europe or from South America toward the northern American continent, and even in recent years from the USA toward Canada (for Africans and Haitians expelled from the U.S.). These mass displacements from highly populated regions to variably densified, industrialised countries can have a nonnegligible effect on demographics in all implied regions, creating imbalances and conflicts. Incidentally, Diana Coole briefly touches that issue of migration in the beginning of her book (p. 3). In a globalising context, we can observe how demographics, poverty, and mass population movements are intrinsically linked and cannot be isolated whenever being studied.

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