

UnTextbooked

A history podcast for the future.

Transcript: [Does population control work?](#)

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Guest	Matthew Connelly
Season - Episode	2 - 4
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Gabe Hostin 0:04

UnTextbooked producer Oliver Wang comes from a small family, but his family isn't necessarily small by choice. Every generation in my family before me has been no more than two people because of the policy.

Oliver's family is originally from China. When his grandparents were looking to start a family, Chinese policies prevented them from having any more than two children. These policies were sometimes enforced quite brutally with forced abortion sterilization even infanticide.

Oliver Wang 0:36

And so I found a super big interest in the history of the world's population, especially because my parents were first generation immigrants and so population control in China from where they immigrated was a huge issue.

Gabe Hostin 0:53

100 years ago, the world's population was just 2 billion people. Today, it's nearly 8 billion. This rapid quadrupling of world population comes along with an increasing demand for things like cars, electronics and travel, things that stress the planet's limited resources. It all makes all Ever wonder how is the world going to manage an ever growing population?

Oliver Wang 1:16

It's like do we need to take these extreme measures? Are they correct? When people think about some of the biggest issues in the world right now? A lot of the times we think about like

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climate change poverty and like different conflicts around the world. But I think a lot of people overlook the fact that overpopulation ties into a lot of that. So there's a lot of interesting history behind different population control methods that are used and that ranges from like immigration policies to war to even like for sterilization, which is something that my own parents grew up under in China. So that's just sort of a personal stakeholder that I have in this topic. That combined with my love for history and the study of different cultures just leads into why I picked they don't misconception Matthew Connelly's book on population control. And this book really goes into the nitty gritty details of population control all over the world and he really focuses on what hasn't been ethical and what hasn't worked out in history so he can sort of propose a solution as to the ethics, how to do population control ethically in the future, and effectively.

Gabe Hostin 2:34

After the break, Oliver Wang talks to Matthew Connelly, about how population control was once considered a solution for all of humanity's problems that ultimately ended up leading to unintended consequences. I'm Gabe Hostin and this is UnTextbooked.

Oliver Wang 2:51

UnTextbooked Hi, Professor Connolly. Nice to finally meet you.

Dr. Matthew Connelly 3:01

Hey, great meeting you, Oliver, really happy to talk with you.

Oliver Wang 3:04

So when and why did society really start worrying so much about overpopulation?

Dr. Matthew Connelly 3:10

Well, you could go back, you know, a long ways you can go back, you know, even to the end of the 19th century, you know, many even then started to worry that, you know, most of the, you know, arable lands in the world were being cultivated. You know that, what to them anyway, we're talking mainly about European colonists what seemed like the lands that were still available for settlement. were for the most part already settled, or at least you know, these were places now in the process of being conquered. And so, there is a sense, you know, that, you know, the earth, you know, was this finite globe, and there was a for some, anyway, a sense of anxiety. And even in the, you know, late 19th century, there are many people already asking who will inherit the earth. And at that time, you know, and still last year, there are many who looked at the world, you know, not even in terms of, you know, the countries of the world, they would look at the world in terms of the races of the world, right? And so, you know, if we go back to the 1870s, for example, this was one of the main reasons now, why the United States began to impose restrictions on immigration. And one of the reasons why they started with Chinese immigrants is because there was this idea that if the Chinese were allowed to emigrate to the United States, that the Chinese would begin to expand no all across the United States. And so even then, you know, even in the 1870s, you know, about 150 years ago now, there was already

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this idea that it might be necessary to control population growth and movement. And the first movement to do that was the movement to try to stop people from emigrating, especially from Asia. And this is especially the case in places like the United States, Australia, Canada, and so on. But population control came along later. And it really came on the scene and really became a force onto itself, you know, in the 1960s. This was a period in which, you know, the real concern for more and more people, and not just, you know, individual intellectuals and movement leaders and so on, but, you know, major foundations like the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and also you know, for many governments, including the US government, they began to think that the real problem was that poor people, especially in poor countries, were having far too many children. And then if nothing was done, that we were going to see global famines around the world. And so the idea of population control, typically, you know, was about trying to get poor people to stop having so many children and creating the technologies, you know, not just different kinds of contraception, sterilization, but also new techniques, you know, using the media, for example, to try to inform their choices and in some cases, you know, to shape their choices and even you know, course people into having fewer children. So, population control came along later, and it was much more focused specifically on trying to get poor people to have fewer children.

Oliver Wang 6:11

There is a lot of dark history behind this whole population planning movement, and you cover it very vividly. Can you give a few examples of sort of specific policies and in different countries that have led to ethical consequences? And can you sort of explain the consequences that they had back then as well as any lasting consequences that they may have? Still today? For example, you see, these sort of gender imbalances in sort of different countries, or you see sex selective abortions? Can you just go over a little bit

Dr. Matthew Connelly 6:46

of that? Absolutely. Yeah. The first thing to know is that this period of the 1960s of the period in which population control really became a worldwide movement. This was a period of which, if you looked at for example, you know, the people working on population, the Ford Foundation, or you looked at the people at some of the leading know think tanks like Population Council, these are the kind of men you know, who believe that the way you achieve things in this world was to set targets, right, and to, you know, have quantitative metrics that would allow you to show that you're making progress towards your goals. And what you find is when you read the documents you read, you know how it is that people discussed, you know, population control programs, they would talk about what they were doing is trying to reach targets, right and increase the number of acceptors. And that tells you something like this whole way of imagining, typically women by the way, women who are meant to be the ones you know, to adopt the IUD who are ones who were meant to be sterilized, they were talking about them, you know, not as women right? Making choices, but instead they were talking about them as targets, right and this acceptors and so the kinds of things I'm talking about would be for example, they would send consultants to India, the World Bank, you know, the Ford Foundation, they would send

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consultants and in a period in which you know, India was facing real difficulty and actual famine in parts of the country. They advised that India in order to get control of its population was going to have to set targets and the technology of choice at that time was the IUD intrauterine device. And they wanted in many cases, to incentivize these being economist in many cases. They wanted to incentivize people to make the constant choices to achieve those goals. They thought the best way to do it was just to pay people money. So they wanted to pay people money in order to agree to be inserted with IEDs. So what would happen is, you know, you had people meant to be, you know, responsible for the health of people living in these places where we're paying for people to be inserted with IEDs and doing it in mobile vans, you know, they would drive from village to village, but without any thought, you know, as to screening beforehand, right to see whether this was the appropriate contraception, or any kind of care provided afterwards to deal with the significant numbers of people who are having side effects. And these side effects could be a whole range of different things from prolonged menstrual bleeding tech topic pregnancies, and so there are really a lot of serious consequences that came from this one program. And it was such that, you know, by the end of it, yes, so they counted up millions and millions of people who would agree to be inserted IUDs in some cases over and over again, because import poor people in four places in some cases realized that they could get paid for doing this. They had IUDs inserted and removed and over and over again. So it's true that millions of these IEDs was insert were inserted. But for years afterwards, nobody wanted to use an IUD in India. And it wasn't just in India and a number of other places where they pushed IUDs it meant that this particular contraceptive, which can be completely appropriate in many cases, and works very well for many people, was something that that most people didn't want to have anything to do with. This program was in the end of failure, and it discredited intrauterine devices. And so in the early 1970s, the government of India, again with the advice and the support of international aid agencies decided that they would have to go further. For time at least they were talking about how they would make it illegal. They would make it illegal for people to have larger families. They didn't ultimately go ahead with that law. It wasn't until China you know formalized the two child policy or the one child policy that we saw that kind of legal, you know framework for requiring smaller families and providing legal consequences when people resisted, but in the case of India, they they use more informal methods. So for example, the government of India would go into poor neighborhood in Delhi, and they would use bulldozers to tear down the structures in which poor people were living. They would destroy these neighborhoods, and then they would tell those who were now homeless, that the only way they would be provided with a new home is if they produce a sterilization certificate. So in other words, you know, they were using, you know, the threat of homelessness in order to force people to go to sterilization camps at these sterilization camps. You can just imagine what the conditions were like. These sterilization camps are ones where eventually they sterilized some 6 million people in a single year. So this was a massive national program. And it was one that was carried out with was quite real threats, you know, against those who refuse to go along. So I'm giving you an example. You know how it is. But we're crashed programs meant to deal with what they described as a global crisis. They led to these kinds of plans. And programs that were highly force of nature and lead to all kinds of unintended consequences. And you mentioned

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another example, I'll just address that more briefly. Sex selective abortion. If your goal is to reduce fertility rates, then you will think about for example, you know, why is it that people choose to have, you know, 234567 children, and they realize that many of these people, you know, wanted to have sons or at least one son, once you know, it became technologically feasible and even easy to determine the sex of a fetus, typically through ultrasound, then what you found the vast majority of people and patriarchal societies were aborting female fetuses, and so that they could ensure having sons and so this is one of the main reasons why you see skewed sex ratios in places like India and China. And Korea. So this is another example of how you know if your, your goal your overriding goal is to reduce fertility rates, then sure you're going to try all kinds of things, you're going to explore new concept technology, and in this case, you're going to do tremendous damage. Right. And so I think it's quite telling that this problem that is all too often attributed, you know, to societies that are patriarchal places that are sometimes even described as backward. In fact, you know, these This was originally the idea of some of the most respected social scientists of the day.

Oliver Wang 13:28

You detail the United Nations Conference in Cairo, Egypt, in 1994, where they set a bunch of new reproductive rights and the standard for reproductive rights throughout the world. So how important was this events in terms of reproductive rights?

Dr. Matthew Connelly 13:47

So the UN actually played a really important role in this history. This movement that I've been describing is this worldwide movement to try to control population growth. He was acting under the auspices of the United Nations because they could invoke the moral authority of the United Nations and also they had the backing of the UN Population Fund. Which became one of the largest suppliers of financing for population control programs. And I would argue that the story that I tell you about this worldwide movement to control population is one that finally ended at a UN conference, because it was there that the UN, you know, accepted and endorsed. You know, the idea that women's rights were human rights, right. And that included and had to include the ability of women to own and control their own bodies. Now, this is a real turning point, because again, until then, it was largely men who were running these organizations, and they've been able to do so with that kind of moral authority of the UN. Now, that doesn't mean to answer your question or it doesn't mean that you know, you don't see population control any longer. I mean, even now, in China, for example, you know, the government's still our gates to itself, the brights decide how many children people can have. And there are many more places including India, where people are still, you know, trying to implement policies to pay for people to agree to have smaller families. And in fact, in some places, you're even seeing a bit of a revival, you know, that this idea, in some cases, because of what many people think of as the new crisis, right? The the crisis of climate change but what I would argue is that none of these programs, none of these policies any longer, you know, have the moral authority of the United Nations. We've covered

Oliver Wang 15:27

a lot of these sort of ethical violations and moral violations in the past but at present when you look at the world's fertility rate, you'll see that the numbers are significantly lower than what it was in the 1960s. And so that just makes me wonder if this whole population movements, even with its sort of ethical violations has worked or is it not, is there something else that contributed to this decline in fertility?

Dr. Matthew Connelly 15:55

That's a great question, Oliver. You know, there are some who would say that, sure, you know, there are bumps along the road, right? Or they might use other kinds of metaphors. They might say, like, you know, to make an omelet, you have to crack some eggs, right? So, you know, of course, like we're familiar with this idea, right, that sometimes, you know, great achievements in history require great sacrifice. But when you think about it, I mean, there are a few ways to think about one is like, who actually made these sacrifices, right. I mean, was it really necessary, you know, to impose this on some of the poorest people in the world? Right, if the real problem was the problem of economic inequality, or the problem was then and now, you know, environmental scarcity or climate change? You know, why is it that only the poorest people had to make these kinds of sacrifices and I think it's quite telling in China for example, they keep easing you know, restrictions on size, the family, you know, where before there was a one child policy, and now there's a two child policy, and in fact, they're now trying to figure out ways that they can encourage people to have larger families. It's having no effect. There's basically no effect in terms of people actually wanting to have more children. And it's just another example of how you know, even before the one child policy, Chinese were having smaller families already, even without stake worsen, and they'll continue doing that I would predict, even without any further easing and the one child policy, what I would argue is that you really dig into it, you get down into like how these programs actually worked, and how often they didn't work. And you look at the differences between different countries that had more or less force of family planning programs. What you find is that it's true, you know, countries like India and China that had really close to family planning. Programs. They did see reductions in fertility rates, but so too, did many other countries that did not have family planning of any kind. I mean, there are many countries where they made it quite difficult for people to obtain contraception right and impossible to to have safe and legal access to abortion. So if it's family planning that explains, you know, the way in which either they, you know, lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, or you know, they save the planet from overpopulation, then why is that these other countries that had almost no family planning of any kind, why is these two these countries have much lower fertility rates as well? I'm convinced that what really made a difference in terms of why it is that parents and especially women decided to have fewer children. It's the fact that more and more women had access to education and paid work. And there have been study after study all over the world, showing that there is clearly a very strong correlation between women's access to education at paid work, and smaller family size. So my argument is that it's not that you know, the Ford Foundation and the Population Fund The World Bank, no save the world from overpopulation. In fact, you know, it was women, right, and women gaining rights to

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education to employment, making smart choices for themselves for their families that explain why we've seen a decline in fertility worldwide.

Oliver Wang 19:08

So the population crisis has been a point of contention for a long time. Now, a lot of researchers have different arguments on just how much the world can sustain how many people the world can sustain. And so just based on your professional opinion, in this field, do you believe that the world was is or ever will be at a point where it's considered overpopulated?

Dr. Matthew Connelly 19:35

Well, it really depends on you know, how it is that those billions of people choose to live. The people you know who I think you know, are the most expert in these questions are ones who will tell you that the number of people in the world is really just part of the equation that you have to also look at, you know, where these people live, how they're living. Because you know, what worries do are things like the production of greenhouse gas emissions, or the consumption of finite resources, then you really ought to be focused on the people who are producing the most greenhouse gases and consuming the most resources. But unfortunately, at least for most of the history of last 100 years, and people have had these kinds of worries for a really long time. For most of that time, people instead tended to look at poor people. And they thought that in fact, you know, the solution to the world's population problem was just to get poor people to stop having so many children. So, you know, the point I would make is that was fertility rates already defining around the world and yet still you know, we see not nearly enough reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. I am not convinced that trying to control world population is really going to provide solutions to this problem. I would argue that the real problem here, it's about consumption patterns, right and how people understand the good life. One of the big ironies in history of family planning is that the way that they tried to convince people to have smaller families was by telling them that if they had fewer children, they could have more stuff. Because they were telling people for generations that by choosing to have small families, they could have transistor radios and televisions and colored televisions, automobiles and second homes and so on. So that's the message that they were using to try to convince people to have smaller families. How is it we can now turn around and tell them that they should have smaller families in order to save the planet? Right, so these are really different things and if we want to be clear headed, about things like climate change, we really need to understand the root causes of the problem. And it's really not large populations. So that's why you know, if, in thinking about these kinds of issues, the main concern would be environmental scarcity and global climate change. We really have to be very specific, you know about what the problem is, and who we think is overpopulated in the world.

Oliver Wang 22:03

Dr. Matthew Connelly is the author of fatal misconception the struggle to control world population. Professor Connelly, where can people find more of your work?

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Dr. Matthew Connelly 22:12

I have a website, Matthew Connelly dotnet. And there you'll see links to other things that I've written, I still, you know, deeply interested in all the issues we discussed Oliver, and if people want to talk to me about them, I'm happy to do it. I'm very easily accessible both through my website and to Mike from university now.

Gabe Hostin 22:43

Dr. Matthew Connelly is professor of international and global history at Columbia University. He's the author of fatal misconception the struggle to control world population. Oliver Lang is a freshman at Dartmouth College. Our website is untextbooked.org and on social media at UnTextbooked. Our music is by Silas Bowen and Coleman Hamilton. UnTextbooked is edited by Bethany Denton, and Jeff Emtman. Fernande Raine is our executive producer. UnTextbooked is a project of Got history, an organization that believes in a world where all young people can advance civic well being for themselves. Society and the planet. Thanks for listening