

For liberals, doomsday is the religion of choice

Brett Stephens, Wall Street Journal, 9 November 2015

Maybe Sigmund Freud should have been a political scientist. Psychoanalysis may be useless as treatment for neurotics, but there's something to be said for it as a mode of ideological investigation. To wit, what explains the fatal attraction of the secular mind to the politics of impending apocalypse?

I'm reminded of this again as embarrassed eulogies are being written for China's one-child policy, which Beijing finally eased last week after a 35-year experiment in social folly and human cruelty.

China's looming demographic disaster

Instituted in the name of resource conservation, the policy resulted in millions of forced abortions and involuntary sterilisations, a male-female birth imbalance of 118-100, and a looming demographic disaster as Chinese grow old while the working population shrinks.

As government policy goes, the one-child policy was as repressive and illiberal as it gets: the ultimate invasion of privacy; the ultimate assault on the human rights of women and girls. Naturally, liberals loved it.

They loved it, in part, because it had been their idea to begin with. Paul Ehrlich helped get the ball rolling with his 1968 blockbuster *The Population Bomb*, which begins with the words: "The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now."

Ehrlich, a biologist at Stanford, had no scholarly credentials as a demographer or an economist. But that didn't keep him from putting a scientific gloss on a personal prejudice.

The Population Bomb

From *The Population Bomb* there came Zero Population Growth, a non-government organisation co-founded by Ehrlich.

Next there was the UN Population Fund, founded in 1969, followed by the neo-Malthusian Club of Rome, whose 1972 report, *The Limits to Growth*, sold 30 million copies.

In India in the mid-70s, the Indira Gandhi regime forcibly sterilised 11 million people. World Bank president Robert McNamara praised Gandhi for "intensifying the family planning drive with rare courage and conviction". An estimated 1750 people were killed in botched procedures.

Power is seductive, as are fame and wealth

Power is seductive, as are fame and wealth, and it's easy to see how being a scientific prophet of doom afforded access to all three. So long as the alarmists fed the hysteria, the hysteria would feed the alarmists — with no end of lucrative book contracts and lavish conferences in exotic destinations to keep the cycle going.

It's also not surprising that someone such as Ehrlich, trained as an entomologist, would be tempted to think of human beings as merely a larger type of insect.

"My language would be even more apocalyptic today," an unrepentant Ehrlich told *TheNew York Times* earlier this year.

"The idea that every woman should have as many babies as she wants is to me exactly the same kind of idea as everybody ought to be permitted to throw as much of their garbage into their neighbour's backyard as they want." Notice what Ehrlich is comparing to garbage.

But the real question isn't what drives people to be leaders of a new movement. That's easy enough to understand. It's why so many people — usually well-educated, urbane liberals — would wish to be followers.

It isn't the strength of the evidence. The idea of a population bomb was always preposterous: the world's 7.3 billion people could fit into an area the size of Texas, with each person getting about 93sq m of personal space.

Food has never been more abundant

As for resource scarcity, the fracking revolution reminds us that scarcity is not so much a threat to mankind as it is an opportunity for innovation.

What matters, rather, is the strength of the longing. Modern liberalism is best understood as a movement of would-be believers in search of true faith. For much of the 20th century it was faith in history, especially in its Marxist interpretation. Now it's faith in the environment. Each is a comprehensive belief system, an instruction sheet on how to live, eat and reproduce, a story of how man fell and how he may be redeemed, a tale of impending crisis that's also a moral crucible.

In short, a religion without God

I sometimes wonder whether the journalists now writing about the failure of the one-child policy ever note the similarities with today's climate "crisis". That the fears are largely the same. And the political prescriptions are almost identical. And the leaders of the movement are cut from the same cloth. And the confidence with which the alarmists prescribe radical cures, their intolerance for dissenting views, their insistence on "global solutions", their disdain for democratic input or technological adaptations — that everything is just as it was when bell-bottoms were in vogue.

China's one-child policy has been one of the great unrecognised tragedies of our time. It is a modern-day lesson in the danger of environmental fears and the misanthropic solutions they typically inspire.

It behoves us to learn its lessons before we repeat its mistakes on a vaster scale.

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