

# The New King Herods

Frank Furedi | *February 04, 2009*

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**THE totalitarian impulse to control people's reproductive lives has received the blessing of sections of the political elite. It is reported that the British government-sponsored Sustainable Development Commission believes that curbing peoples' right to reproduce should be central to the fight against global warming. Jonathon Porritt, who chairs the commission and is also a patron of the Malthusian campaigning group the Optimum Population Trust, wants to turn population control into the key objective of environmental campaigning.**

Porritt's estrangement from the newborn puts him in the company of a growing band of dreary misanthropists. King Herod's fear of the newborn was confined to one baby. Today's misanthropic fear-merchants have a wider target. Barry Walters, associate professor of obstetric medicine at the University of Western Australia, believes the very survival of the planet demands stringent controls on the number of children parents can have. This is what he has to say: "Anthropogenic greenhouse gases constitute the largest source of pollution, with by far the greatest contribution from humans in the developed world. Every newborn baby in Australia represents a potent source of greenhouse gas emissions for an average of 80 years, not simply by breathing, but by the profligate consumption of resources typical of our society. What then should we do as environmentally responsible medical practitioners? We should point out the consequences to all who fail to see them, including, if necessary, the ministers for health. Far from showering financial booty on new mothers and thereby rewarding greenhouse-unfriendly behaviour, a Baby Levy in the form of a carbon tax should apply, in line with the polluter pays principle."

Throughout history, different cultures have celebrated birth as a unique moment signifying the joy of life. The reinterpretation of birth as a form of greenhouse-unfriendly behaviour speaks to today's degraded imagination, where carbon-reduction becomes the supreme moral imperative. Once every newborn baby is dehumanised in this way, represented as a professional polluter who is a potent source of greenhouse gas emissions, it becomes increasingly difficult to feel anything other than apprehension about the growth of the human race.

Robbing babies of what we perceive to be their endearing innocence makes it easier to scare people off having them. In recent centuries, babies were described as a blessing; now some argue that not having a baby is a blessing, at least for the environment.

Such a reversal in the way we regard human life can be seen in the writings of environmentalists such as Kelpie Wilson. She argues that, today, abortion is not so much a necessary option that allows women some control over their lives, but a sacrifice everyone should be encouraged to make in the interests of the environment. To understand that a tiny embryo must sometimes be sacrificed for the greater good of the family or the human species as a whole is the moral high ground that we stand on today, says Wilson. Why? Because we have to consider how we will live tomorrow on a resource-depleted and climate-compromised planet. Scare stories about the physical limits of the planet are presented as moral arguments about abortion.

Since the beginning of time, one of the clearest markers of an enlightened civilised society has been the moral status it attaches to human life. And outwardly, 21st century Western society expresses an unprecedented degree of affirmation for human life. The principle of human rights is widely

celebrated. The phenomenal growth in health expenditure shows that prosperous societies care very much for human well-being and life. In some cases, Western societies go to extraordinary lengths to keep alive a premature baby or to prolong the life of elderly people or people who are chronically ill.

Yet these things exist in an ambiguous relationship with contemporary society's estrangement from its own humanity. To put it bluntly: it is difficult to celebrate human life if people, or at least the growth of the number of people, are looked upon as the source of the world's problems. Today, the humanist impulse that drove the development of the modern world has been displaced by an outlook that regards humanity with suspicion, if not outright hostility. Indeed, one of the main themes of contemporary scaremongering is that people should fear themselves and their fellow human beings. Over-eating is only one way that people are said to become complicit in acts of planetary destruction. It seems our very existence, our very need for sustenance, is a curse for Mother Earth. In recent times, scaremongers have become very inventive in recasting human behaviour as essentially destructive. In previous times, religious leaders would rebuke sinners and threaten them with a fate worse than death. Often people were burdened with the charge of Original Sin. Yet despite such a harsh regime of theological authority, religious leaders also recognised people's capacity for virtuous behaviour. Human life was affirmed as unique and special, and people who behaved according to "The Book" were assured salvation and the blessing of the Almighty. Many of today's Malthusians take a very different approach. They find it difficult to see any redeeming qualities in the human condition, and appear to be driven by a passionate desire to make us scared of ourselves.

Popular, cultural representations frequently imply that the development of civilisation, particularly the advance of science and technology, is the source of today's problems of environmental destruction and social disintegration. Some environmentalist writers even view the shift from a nomadic existence to the advent of agriculture as historically problematic. Wilson argues that suddenly there was a massive population growth in the human species. This led to friction and war and environmental destruction. From this perspective, the lifestyles of hunter-gatherers are the most harmonious with the environment; they got things right, apparently, while civilisation simply cocked everything up.

The idea that civilisation is responsible for the perils we face today assigns an undistinguished status to the human species. The most striking manifestation of the loathing for everything human can be seen in the idea that we need a significant reduction in the number of human beings. As Theodore Roszak wrote in the *New Scientist* in August 2002: "There isn't a single ecological problem that won't be ameliorated by a smaller population." Now we have Porritt demanding smaller families in order to save the planet. So maybe the solution is the extinction of the human race? The argument for limiting family sizes in Britain is the first hesitant step in that direction.

*Frank Furedi's most recent book, Invitation To Terror: The Expanding Empire of The Unknown, is published by Continuum Press.*