

Audio Transcript: So Over Population, Part 1

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Sam Evans-Brown: [00:00:01] Okay. We should probably just start by introducing ourselves.

Justine Paradis: [00:00:04] Well, I'm Jimmy Gutierrez.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:00:06] I'm Justine Paradis.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:00:07] You guys.

Justine Paradis: [00:00:08] All right, we'll do it again.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:00:09] Nope. Too late. We're moving on. Just to start us off, I'm going to give you two a little insight into this thing that happens to anybody who writes about the environment. And to illustrate this, I went and stood in front of our local independent bookseller and pestered people on the street.

Justine Paradis: [00:00:24] Great place to find environmentalists.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:00:26] That's true. If I were to ask you what you'd say the greatest [00:00:30] threat to the environment is today. What would you say it is? So people are freaked out by all kinds of things.

Person on street 1: [00:00:35] The exhaust, gasoline fumes.

Person on Street 2: [00:00:38] Factory farming?

Person on street 3: [00:00:39] Yeah, probably. That's what I would say too.

Person on street 4: [00:00:41] Very powerful. Very rich. It's businesses that are allowed to just drill oil and dump all their waste out with no consequences. Probably emissions, but I'm not sure what the biggest cause is.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:00:58] Generally speaking, there's one [00:01:00] freak out that is dominant climate change.

Person on street 5: [00:01:02] People talk about climate change.

Person on street 3: [00:01:04] Climate change. Yeah, I guess I presume that that's what you were supposing was climate change is the biggest.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:01:11] But if you discard that, say you're not allowed to say climate change. Okay. What if I said you can't say climate change?

Person on street 6: [00:01:18] That's not very fair of you.

Person on street 3: [00:01:20] Okay. Oh I see.

Person on street 5: [00:01:21] Well, no climate change really gets them all.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:01:23] So you don't have to dig very Deep to Know that there are a lot of people worried [00:01:30] about us humans.

Person on street 7: [00:01:33] The biggest threat to the environment. I mean, overall, I mean people.

Person on street 8: [00:01:38] Overpopulation.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:01:40] So overpopulation was one of the biggest environmental issues in the 60s and 70s, arguably bigger than saving the whales, planting trees, acid rain. And as an environmental journalist, inevitably you hear from people who still believe that to be the case. I hear from them at events, I hear from them in [00:02:00] emails, and they say, why don't we ever talk about population anymore? Okay. Hard pivot here. Have you seen Avengers?

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:02:10] I just saw it.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:02:11] Infinity war.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:02:11] The infinity war. Yeah.

Justine Paradis: [00:02:12] I'm going to be the foil who doesn't know anything about the Avengers.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:02:15] Infinity War is the climax of about a dozen superhero movies, which all have been building a storyline piece by piece of this ultimate bad guy, Thanos little one.

Thanos: [00:02:26] It's a simple calculus. This universe is finite, [00:02:30] its resources finite. Its life is left unchecked. Life will cease to exist. It needs correction. You don't know that. I'm the only one who knows that. At least I'm the only one with the will to act on it.

Justine Paradis: [00:02:47] Got it.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:02:48] Thanos' master plan is to kill half of the entire universes population. And he's motivated by one concern overpopulation.

Thanos: [00:02:58] Titan was like most planets. [00:03:00] Too many mounds, not enough to go around.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:03:03] Me watching this movie, I'm like, oh my God, the ultimate bad guy of all bad guys is basically a 1970s environmentalist.

Justine Paradis: [00:03:12] Woo!

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:03:15] Do you remember when Black Panther came out? There was all this Killmonger was right. Like there were t shirts. Killmonger was right. Reddit, Facebook groups. Same thing happened with Thanos. Where that take? Yeah,

there there was a Reddit group that said Thanos [00:03:30] did nothing wrong. 700,000 people joined it. And obviously I'm not saying that environmentalists wanted to kill half of all the people in the world. All I'm saying is that culturally, we're in a really weird place when it comes to this subject. Like Hollywood saw fit to pick this this ideology as the worst. But then all sorts of people were still sort of like, you know, I'm kind of on board. This [00:04:00] is outside in a show about the natural world and how we use it today. We're talking about population, how it went from being on the front pages of our newspapers and all over late night television, to being the issue that you'll only hear out of the mouth of a comic book supervillain. And this subject, let's just say it's not the kind of story that you can handle breezily in a half hour or so, which means we're going to spend two episodes on it. So buckle up. [00:04:30] We're going down the rabbit hole. All right. We're starting out way back in the day.

Justine Paradis: [00:04:43] Like how far back?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:04:44] We're starting? In the 1700s. And even back then, when there were less than a billion people on the planet already, there were people who were concerned about whether there was going to be enough to go around.

Derek Hoff: [00:04:55] Well, I mean, the population debate goes back to Benjamin Franklin, who was concerned about [00:05:00] all these German immigrants coming to the country. I mean.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:05:02] I'm gonna introduce you to Derek Hoff. He's a historian at the University of Utah and has been studying the the discourse around population. And what you see is looking at this history. Anxiety about population has been around for a very, very long time. But have you heard of Thomas Malthus?

Justine Paradis: [00:05:18] Yeah.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:05:19] Malthusianism.

Justine Paradis: [00:05:20] Malthus --.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:05:21] I've heard of Malthusianism, but I have not heard of that character.

Justine Paradis: [00:05:24] Yeah. Bring us up to speed.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:05:25] Malthus was a clergyman and an economist back in the late 1700s, early 1800s in England. [00:05:30] And so he wrote about this after Ben Franklin. And that period was not a great time in England. The Empire was falling apart. The industrial Revolution was getting into swing. So a lot of big anxiety inducing changes. And if you hear something being referred to as Malthusian today, it's usually shorthand for people making very pessimistic predictions that ultimately turn out to be wrong.

Justine Paradis: [00:05:55] Were they mathy predictions?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:05:57] They were mathy predictions about how much food we're producing [00:06:00] and when famine is going to hit, and starvation was going to be visited upon all of us. And he, in his wrong wrongness, was really worried about poor people. It is an.

Reading Thomas Malthus: [00:06:11] Evident truth that whatever may be the rate of increase in the means of subsistence, the increase of population must be limited by it, at least after the food has once been divided into the smallest shares that will support life.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:06:23] And what he's really saying here is that there will be poverty no matter what, and helping poor people will just lead to famine and which will kill them regardless. [00:06:30] And so, instead of helping them.

Reading Thomas Malthus: [00:06:31] Instead of recommending cleanliness to the poor, we should encourage contrary habits in our towns. We should make the streets narrower, crowd more people into the houses, and court the return of the plague in the country. We should build our villages near stagnant pools and particularly encourage settlements in all marshy and unwholesome situations.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:06:57] So that's Thomas Malthus. [00:07:00] I mean.

Justine Paradis: [00:07:00] It's just math. The numbers don't lie.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:07:02] You also gotta love that this is where Thanos is coming from.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:07:05] So. Well, so it goes back a very, very long way. But again, when you look through this history, what you find is that this population angst of the Malthusian variety is often tied to people's concern about other people poor people, immigrants, Africans. It's like a Rorschach test for the mood of the time.

Derek Hoff: [00:07:25] But the debate really did take off after World War two, as the [00:07:30] world went through some of the most rapid population growth that it ever has. As birth rates were peaking, and as the Cold War made policymakers in the West very concerned about areas of poverty succumbing to the Stalinist temptation. And one of the main arguments was that excessive population growth combined with improvements in public health, which means that populations were growing all the more that those would become breeding grounds for communism.

Justine Paradis: [00:07:59] Red scare [00:08:00], instantly.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:08:01] Can I say something real quick before that? Like this is like post World War two?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:08:05] Yeah. So it's like the right in the middle of the baby boom.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:08:07] Okay. And so like we had had conversations and like experiments with eugenics and sterilization and all of these things and, and this is still kind of like pretty okay to openly.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:08:19] We're coming back to eugenics.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:08:20] Okay.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:08:21] Okay, okay. We'll get to eugenics. But [00:08:30] that brings us to the 1960s and the population bomb. Have you heard of the population bomb?

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:08:37] No. Should I have?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:08:39] It's a bomb.

Justine Paradis: [00:08:42] It's the p bomb.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:08:44] I try to Stay up on bombs.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:08:46] This was written by an ecologist named Paul Ehrlich in 1968. And just to be clear, there were a ton of demographers and think tanks and stuff like that that were already worried about our population growth rates. The idea didn't come from Ehrlich. He just [00:09:00] sort of wrote the airport bookstore version of it. And again, like Malthus, if I think if anything has penetrated the public consciousness about the population bomb, it's that his predictions were very scary. He was predicting widespread famine throughout the world by the 1980s, and none of that materialized. But over the course of the next ten years after its publication, he went on The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson more than 20 times. So [00:09:30] one of the things that Erlich popularized was this formula called the IPAT. Impact equals population times affluence, times technology.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:09:52] Impact equals... I'm writing this down. Population times affluence.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:09:56] You were a good student, weren't you? I can tell.

Justine Paradis: [00:09:59] So again, [00:10:00] math. It doesn't. How could you argue?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:10:02] Well, I mean, like, the idea that you can come up with a mathematical formula for impact is insane. So, like like, just lay that aside for a moment.

It's more of like a thought experiment than an actual than actual math. What the formula says is that population is this inevitable multiplier of all of our environmental problems.

Justine Paradis: [00:10:19] Right. But so are the other two things.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:10:21] But but these folks were very focused on the population part of that formula. P yeah, okay. And it wasn't just an academic debate. I mean, there weren't many [00:10:30] TV channels back then. So this is like him being on one of television's biggest shows over and over and over. By the way, 1980 was when that interview happened during the oil crisis. Once again, population.

Justine Paradis: [00:10:58] Right.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:10:59] A mirror for whatever [00:11:00] we're worried about.

Justine Paradis: [00:11:00] Petroleum. It's just I think one thing that I continue to be struck by is just the like, incredibly like considered rational, calm tone, like we're just looking at the facts. But it is a really emotional, fear driven debate.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:11:12] Yeah. And this is happening and especially strange time too, because you had people that were anxious about overpopulation because they were freaked out about not having enough resources, fuel or food. And you had people who were anxious about overpopulation because they cared about the environment. Like all of these people [00:11:30] would fill up wild spaces. But in the 1970s, those two circles of people grew and in part merged. And it was at this moment that you've got the birth of sort of the modern environmental movement. I mean, the first Earth Day in 1970, there were 20 million people out in the streets in through the 70s you got the creation of the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the EPA. You've got Nixon trying to harness all that energy and bring it over to the Republican Party.

President Nixon: [00:11:59] If [00:12:00] the present trends continue, it's going to be mean that 115 million people, this increase in population, most of it's going to go to the cities. That's the trend. And our cities are going to be choked with people. They're going to be choked with traffic. They're going to be choked with crime. They're going to be choked with pollution.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:12:19] People are out in the streets talking about population. It was everywhere. The Rockefellers started a think tank trying to deal with it. Republicans [00:12:30] were worried about it. Democrats were worried about it. The Pentagon was worried about it. It was everywhere. Again, here's historian Derek Hoff.

Derek Hoff: [00:12:35] This was not a Partizan issue. And many politicians and economists and, you know, rich people like Rockefeller, believe that the world needed to do something about population growth.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:12:48] But as is so often the case, when the entire country starts paying attention to one issue, fault lines start to form. And that's what we'll hear about after a break. [00:13:00]

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:13:00] Before the break, we walked through this cresting wave of anxiety about global population growth through the 1970s. But even as the seeds for that anxiety were being planted at the same time, the seeds for a backlash were being sown as well. And as Derek Hoff, the historian, explains it, it started on the right.

Derek Hoff: [00:13:20] Remember the population bomb in 1968? Roe v Wade is January of 1973. So as the conservative pro-life movement emerges, [00:13:30] it wants nothing to do with folks on the left who are advocating for access to family planning and abortion, usually at the same time. And one of the arguments that abortion activists made in the early 1970s is that this would help bring the population down. And for the first time, what had been a sort of bipartisan support for reducing population in the United States got completely splintered as it got sucked into and overwhelmed by the abortion wars.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:14:03] But [00:14:00] just like fear of overpopulation was bipartisan, so too was the backlash. And the left's outrage came from the fact that many Americans had this tendency to focus on other countries, places with really high birth rates. Here's Frances Kissling, president of the Center for Health, Ethics and Social Policy.

Frances Kissling: [00:14:21] And of course, the people who had to reduce their population were black people and brown people. Plain [00:14:30] and simple.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:14:30] And this is Dorceta Taylor, an environmental sociologist with the University of Michigan.

Dorceta Taylor: [00:14:35] So it's not, you know, right wing groups kind of putting ideas into people's head. It's the it's the emergence of dialogues of people of color. And so women of color from Africa, from Asia.

Frances Kissling: [00:14:48] Environmentalists had a blind spot. They had a blind spot about how one addresses those issues in ways that are sensitive.

Dorceta Taylor: [00:14:59] Fast [00:15:00] forward to the 19, late 1980s, and out of that period comes a lot of organizations that we now refer to as environmental justice organizations, who are not shy about putting the issue of race, racism, discrimination on the agenda, on the table, and calling out these blind spots.

Derek Hoff: [00:15:22] All right, folks like the Black Panthers are actually making a similar kind of neocolonial argument, right? Which is we don't want rich white policymakers [00:15:30] determining, you know, how people in poor community control their bodies and their procreation.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:15:36] This, by the way, was a line of argumentation that right wing critics found absolutely irresistible.

Derek Hoff: [00:15:41] Well, it's such a wonderful, wonderful neutralizer, right? People on the right are used to being accused of a racist agenda. All right. It's it does get old for conservatives to be called racist every other day. So here's an opportunity. Ah, look at those liberals giving dark skinned people birth control.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:15:58] And this wasn't just about [00:16:00] birth control. You don't have to look any farther than Paul Ehrlich, the author of The Population Bomb, to see some of this. He suggested mandatory limits on children might be necessary, and he even went so far as to suggest putting birth control chemicals into public drinking

water in places where the birth rate was stubbornly high. I mean, these people thought all of civilization was at risk and they were not interested in half measures.

Derek Hoff: [00:16:25] Groups like zero population Growth that formed right after the population bomb. [00:16:30] You know, they weren't interested in the compromise politics of liberalism, in tune with the times. They were putting out a radical message.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:16:38] And so what winds up happening, whether environmentalists intended this or not, is that countries start to develop population programs, and some of them were incredibly abusive. Between 1975 and 1977, there were reports of millions of forced sterilizations in India. These, like assembly line style operations, no follow up care. Unhygienic [00:17:00] conditions. In 1979, you get the Chinese one child policy and so on and so on, like all around the world.

Justine Paradis: [00:17:06] You know, and that's even happening in the United States is like with the original testing of birth control was tested on people of color without consent.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:17:14] You know, and it gets wrapped up with the eugenics movement. There were sterilizations of Native American people on reservations.

Dorceta Taylor: [00:17:20] In 1990, I took a trip to Burma, and after about two weeks in, the ladies in the village told someone to bring me [00:17:30] over to talk with the women. And the first question I got when I went over to sit with these ladies was, are you sterilized? And I was stunned. And then I said, why are you asking me if I'm sterilized? And they said, well, everybody in that village and everybody along the Burmese, all the women were sterilized by the time they were about 16 or 17.

Justine Paradis: [00:17:51] Yeah. I mean, I'm just imagining, like, hearing a story like this and then realizing, like, how these ideas [00:18:00] about overpopulation can be wielded in ways that you just never intended and how horrifying that would be.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:18:06] Right. And it's interesting too. It's because, like, so much focus on the equation leaves out so much humanity.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:18:10] Well, it's it's also like even if you just look at the equation, you're doing it wrong. Right? Because if if the populations that have the affluence and the technology are the ones that are causing the impact, then why are we focusing on subsistence farmers in Burma?

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:18:24] Yeah.

Dorceta Taylor: [00:18:30] And [00:18:30] if you have eight cars, are you really contributing more to the global destruction of resources than a woman in the middle of Africa or Asia with four children who lives in maybe 1 or 2 rooms, who recycles everything, who grows her own food, who does rainwater catchment?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:19:12] So [00:19:00] how did this all play out? To tell this story, I've called up Frances, who we heard from a bit earlier.

Frances Kissling: [00:19:19] I have so many titles. My name is Frances Kissling, and I am the president of the Center for Health, Ethics and Social Policy and formerly [00:19:30] the president of Catholics for a Free Choice.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:19:33] This was an advocacy group for pro-abortion rights Catholics that she ran for 25 years.

Frances Kissling: [00:19:37] My job was to make this as my standard line. My job was to make sure that the Pope did not have a good day.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:19:44] Frances started trolling the Pope in 1981, and when I say trolling, I mean trolling.

Frances Kissling: [00:19:50] And one of the most fun things I ever did was we rented a sailboat for 50 people, and we just spent a few [00:20:00] hours leisurely sailing back and forth, yelling slogans at the at the Vatican.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:20:07] Flying flags, pounding drums. Yeah.

Frances Kissling: [00:20:10] Yes, yes. Not the church, not the state. Women will decide their fate.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:20:14] When it comes to pushing back against the Vatican. One of the big places to do it is at the UN. So where did this work begin to intersect with environmentalism?

Frances Kissling: [00:20:27] Around around the time of the Rio [00:20:30] Conference on the environment.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:20:32] These conferences have been taking place every ten years since 1972, but 1992 was the first one that was attended by anyone besides diplomats. And so it was a really big deal. Heads of state from more than 100 countries. Thousands of activists, all in Rio de Janeiro.

Frances Kissling: [00:20:50] It was hot. It was. It was in Rio. It was very, very warm. And it's a huge meeting. The issue of population [00:21:00] and the environment was very much on the agenda.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:21:05] And this is a time where all of these environmental groups and foundations are staffed by young and middle aged professionals, who all came up during Paul Ehrlich's 60s and 70s. And for all of these people, you.

Frances Kissling: [00:21:17] Know, yeah, you know, the sky is going to fall and overpopulation is the problem. This is a deeply held belief stemming from the 60s.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:21:29] So these [00:21:30] environmental groups arrived all geared up to talk about human population growth. And instead of being the thought leaders at this conference, they were being attacked on all sides for their stance on overpopulation. The ground had shifted beneath them.

Frances Kissling: [00:21:46] Well, I remember one woman. I'm trying to remember who she worked for. She worked for one of the big environmental organizations who was a feminist and who who worked in the feminist with us in the feminist tents. And I remember her weeping. Weeping [00:22:00] when she suddenly found that she was not

welcome with other feminists because of the positions of her organization on the link between environmental degradation and population size and growth.

Justine Paradis: [00:22:25] I don't I don't really get what they're saying, that population growth has no impact at all.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:22:29] Well, I mean, [00:22:30] if we go back to the formula, impact equals population times affluence, times technology. These women were saying, hey, global elite, why are you so focused on the P in that equation? The population? Why not go after the A? The affluence. Like if rich people are the ones causing proportionally more impact, why not start with reducing their impact?

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:22:49] I get that, yeah. Like why wouldn't you? I mean, it makes sense though, right?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:22:52] Well, it's sort of like I mean, I think if you're coming from a certain place, you it's obvious that you'd start with the A, but [00:23:00] if you're coming from another place.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:23:01] If you're coming from the A, let's take a look at the population.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:23:04] Right.

Justine Paradis: [00:23:04] Yeah. It feels like there's, there's kind of that that requires questioning what you have. Right. So so there's a really scary, scary thing that lies in the affluence question.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:23:15] And what happened was two years later, in 1994, there was another U.N. conference in Cairo. This one explicitly focused on population. Basically, how was the world going to address population growth moving forward? And guess what?

Frances Kissling: [00:23:29] By the time [00:23:30] of Cairo, a number of the environmental groups did not go to the conference. And I don't think very many of those groups have population or family planning programs to this day.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:23:45] And what would you attribute that to? I mean, is it just sort of like, was it--?

Frances Kissling: [00:23:48] It was a pain in the neck!

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:23:52] What was created at that 1994 meeting in Cairo was a huge shift in how the international community approached this problem. [00:24:00] All of the policies became about voluntary access to family planning, what's called a rights based approach. So you can encourage people to use family planning if they want it, and you can make it available to them. But any other type of of coercive policy.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:24:18] One baby policy.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:24:19] One baby policies.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:24:21] Maybe that's not...

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:24:22] Maybe not a great way to go. And again, the environmental movement is big and diverse. So you can't say that everyone checked out, [00:24:30] but a whole lot of big American groups were like, we're getting burned on this. It's not worth it. And it was immediately after that decision that the international community righted its ship on population policy. And both Frances Kissling and Derek Hoff think the backlash resulted in something else too.

Frances Kissling: [00:24:49] The United Nations got the message that it was politically incorrect to talk about population and a taboo [00:25:00] set in. So if you look at, say, for example, the sustainability development goals, there's almost no mention of population in the goals.

Derek Hoff: [00:25:10] It's absolutely become a taboo. You can at best tiptoe around it in the most gentle terms, but you can never go so far as to say things like, we need to take steps to move toward population stabilization.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:25:24] And this really sets the stage for where things are today. There are folks like Francis and Derek who think [00:25:30] that the backlash was an overcorrection, but not everyone thinks so. Dorceta Taylor, for instance, when I reached out to her, rejected the idea that there's a taboo, and she told me that she almost didn't call me back.

Dorceta Taylor: [00:25:41] Yeah, it's because of how you framed your story. Because I almost didn't respond to you either. I was at my cottage vacationing. That's where I was. And I was thinking, who is this and why do I need to go talk about population?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:25:53] Her argument is that we are still talking about population. We're just doing it in a more nuanced and sensitive way, a way [00:26:00] that takes into consideration all this fraught history, like the problematic rhetoric that has become racialized around it.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:26:08] Like that's that's essentially where it's coming from, though, you know, like it is racialized.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:26:12] Well, so this is what I think is so fascinating about this, because if you go back through all the history, every time we've had one of these swells in anxiety about population, it has always been tied to concern about outgroups. So is it even possible to talk about population [00:26:30] without without being roped into that long history, or by associating yourself with this, with this debate? Are you de facto referencing all of that history?

Justine Paradis: [00:26:45] So some people would say: even with the best of intentions, there's no way to talk about this?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:26:53] Right. Or at least that you can try to talk about it without referencing this history. But your opponents will weaponize this history against you, which [00:27:00] is another argument you see. There's this article which we can link to

in the show notes that was written by David Roberts from Vox, who's one of the internet's most prolific writers about climate change. And he argued that if you talk about global population, it's just going to come back in your face so you can work on it without saying the word population. And it's an interesting thing to think about, because if you accept that you can do this work without talking about the environment at all, then it's really groups like [00:27:30] Planned Parenthood or other organizations that are working to expand access to contraceptives that are that are mostly doing this.

Justine Paradis: [00:27:38] Well, it's really interesting that you say that because one of my takeaways from that article was that he referenced the Drawdown Project, which was the study that quantifies how much carbon different policies can save. So like what are the best ways to really combat climate change. And there was this conclusion of that study that like the number one thing that you can do is family planning and the education of girls, which he calls the "female empowerment package." [00:28:00] David Roberts does, which I just think sounds like some sort of like airline hotel deal or something like educate girls and family planning, all for the cheap price of 120 gigatons of carbon. But yeah, like you don't need to say population. You can just say, oh, access to contraception. And is that a problem that we just decide to speak in those terms?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:28:22] I've, like, every 15 minutes when I write and think about this, I go back and forth. What I can tell you is that I did talk to these two people who do think [00:28:30] that our avoidance of the term causes problems. So here's Frances Kissling again.

Frances Kissling: [00:28:34] I've had stories told to me. There's a marine biologist who wrote an article about the fact that in the research he is doing on coral reefs, one of the major effects on the destruction of coral reefs is human population. But his bosses don't want him to mention that a professor that I know who's an environmental ethicist [00:29:00] was filling in was applying for a grant. She wanted to include population and population ethics in her proposal. Her university told her not to do that. So the political taboo has affected the scientific and the policy community in ways that are not good.

Justine Paradis: [00:29:25] Like I kind of see saying, you know, if you're if you're creating the conditions in which an [00:29:30] academic debate has to speak in

euphemism or talk around something, or there's like a fear, it just it limits the thought. It limits the creativity. It limits the sort of feeling of safety in a discussion.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:29:42] But at the same time, if bringing up population is going to make other people feel unsafe because they don't like where you're going because of this history.

Justine Paradis: [00:29:50] Right. And the intellectual freedom argument is wielded in really nasty ways, as we can see. You know, what's the problem? They just are just ideas. But again, I think that's where you can't [00:30:00] ignore eugenics, right? Because those ideas were used to justify the Holocaust and they're pretty dangerous. I thought I knew how I was going to come down on this. Maybe I still think that as long as we're able to work within this rights based frame and say that women everywhere should be able to just get educated and decide how many children they want. Because am I right that that's what leads to lower birth rates?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:30:22] Yeah. I mean, the magic words are demographic transition. So when women go to school and get jobs and aren't [00:30:30] at home, affluence rises, family sizes get smaller. And that is what has happened in basically all the countries that have have done it.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:30:37] Well, there you go. Population bomb diffused.

Justine Paradis: [00:30:40] Bam.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:30:41] Well, but I mean, the people who are worried about it though, they're basically saying that's not happening fast enough and that you're not going to like the way the world looks with 11 billion people in it.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:30:52] But but even here, it's like, what is the conversation? Is the conversation that there are too many human beings? Or is the conversation [00:31:00] that we do not have enough resources to support life?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:31:04] Well, that and that is the question. Right. And and I think the answer is that it depends on how we live, because there's this really crazy fact,

which is that we already produce enough grain to feed 11 billion people right now, today. But between food waste and feeding grain to cows, which we then eat, the UN estimates that will still need to produce 40% more food than we do today by 2050. So. So [00:31:30] for one, our lifestyle really does matter. But but also it's not just about civilization surviving, but but also at what cost? Like as an extreme thought experiment, what if feeding that many people meant covering every square inch of the world with agriculture and not leaving space for wildlife?

Justine Paradis: [00:31:49] What would a global summit that in good faith that would really what would that really look like? They were like, all right, we're going to create Starship Federation global agreement that we all will live in peace [00:32:00] and and make a decision together about like, what are these different options for quality of life for human beings? We're not close to that.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:32:07] Right? Yeah.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:32:15] Okay, so now we've set the stage. The baby boom and better medical care led to longer life spans that got demographers freaked out about population growth. Paul Ehrlich wrote *The Population Bomb* and brought that freak out to the masses and freaked out. Politicians around [00:32:30] the world created abusive policies that caused a backlash, and made it so that some of the biggest groups are now very careful about how they talk about population. But while all this talk about population through the 60s and 70s and 80s created a backlash, it also created a whole generation of people who were convinced that human population was the problem. And that's the backdrop for the story that we're going to tell next.

Heidi Beirich: [00:32:55] I at the time was a researcher on staff. Right. I'd only been at the center for a couple [00:33:00] of years.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:33:00] This is Heidi Beirich, who works at the Southern Poverty Law Center, which is a nonprofit that has a history of taking legal action against white supremacist groups.

Heidi Beirich: [00:33:09] And I was monitoring the publications of anti-immigrant groups.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:33:12] And she was reading one called The Social Contract.

Heidi Beirich: [00:33:15] And there was an ad in the Social Contract. It was like a quarter page ad, if I'm remembering correctly, that implored the readers of this anti-immigrant publication to join the Sierra Club and influence the board vote. [00:33:30]

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:33:30] The Sierra Club, if you don't know, is one of the nation's oldest environmental groups. It has chapters in almost every state. So what goes through your head when you see something like that?

Heidi Beirich: [00:33:38] Well, I was like, what the hell is this? Right? You know, like it was the last place in the world that I expected to see somebody recruiting for the Sierra Club. Right. The people who read the Social Contract spend all day long talking about how immigrants are criminals and invading the country. And this is the not this isn't like an environmentalist type publication.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:33:59] So [00:34:00] Heidi started to dig into this, and what she found is that there was a battle underway for the soul of the Sierra Club. And at the center of that battle was this fight, the fight about how to talk about population. And that's what we're going to talk about next time.

[00:34:26] Outside In was produced this week by me, Sam Evans-brown with help from Hannah McCarthy, [00:34:30] Justine Paradis, Taylor Quimby and Jimmy Gutierrez. Erika Janik is our executive producer. Maureen McMurray is director of directions. There's more to this story coming out in two weeks, so if there's something you expected to hear but didn't. Please stick with us. And it is a complicated topic. So if you've got something you want to say, come to our Facebook group and let's talk about it. Music. In this episode by Komiku, Jason Leonard, Blue Dot Sessions, and Podington bear. Our theme music is by Brake Master Cylinder. Outside/In is a production of New Hampshire [00:35:00] Public Radio.