

NATIONAL REVIEW

Thanos's Plot in *Avengers: Infinity War* Echoes a Dark Chapter in Recent History

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Thanos, the Mad Titan of Marvel comics and, now, cinema, aims to wipe out half of all life in the universe. In Jim Starlin's original comic series, Thanos is in love with (the embodiment of) Death and hopes to impress her with his feat. But the filmmakers behind *Avengers: Infinity War* gave him a different motivation — one that is chillingly familiar in the real world. After his own planet collapses from civil war and starvation, the movie iteration of Thanos becomes convinced that the destruction resulted from a lack of population control. If it is to be fixed, he reasons, half of the universe's population will need to be culled. Only then, can the powers that be ensure prosperity, health, and safety — for those who survive, anyway.

The mad scientist who is bent on mass destruction for the “greater good” is a sci-fi theme as old as the genre itself. But, alarmingly enough, the idea did not come from comics. Indeed, in the last few decades, two real-life American scientists, Paul and Anne Ehrlich, wrote a best-selling book advocating the same ideas. While their arguments have been thoroughly discredited in the West, they have proven extremely influential on repressive regimes throughout the world.

The Ehrlichs' 1968 book, *The Population Bomb*, opens with the line, “The battle to feed all of humanity is over.” The couple then predicts the deaths of hundreds of millions from worldwide famine within a decade and proposes a set of solutions that would not sound out of place in Thanos's mouth. “Increasing food production will only provide a stay of execution, unless [it is] accompanied by determined and successful efforts at population control,” they argue. “Population control is the conscious regulation of the numbers of human beings to meet the needs, not just of individual families, but of society as a whole.”

Lest anyone have illusions that the Ehrlichs were advocating voluntary reform, they make it clear on the first page that there must be “compulsion if voluntary methods fail.” They cement their misanthropy with a warning: “We can no longer afford merely to treat the symptoms of the cancer of population growth; the cancer itself must be cut out. Population control is the only answer.”

If anything, Thanos's “When I'm done, half of humanity will still exist. Perfectly balanced, as all things should be” sounds *less* misanthropic than the real thing.

Ehrlich's disdain for humanity and implicit racism is clear from his own account of what inspired him. He states in the book that he came to understand population "emotionally" when he went to Delhi. There, "the streets seemed alive with people" — a line that, from a travel writer, would be a positive. In a sort of psychotic repetition, he continues in disgust, "People, people, people, people." By 1984, such doomsday predictions — of, in Ehrlich's words, "an utter breakdown of the capacity of the planet to support humanity" — had influenced major organizations and affected U.S. policy. At a 1974 conference, the United States advocated population targets, meeting with opposition from a strange coalition of the Vatican, the USSR, Communist China, and Catholic Latin American countries.

China, as we now know, would reverse this position a few years later and adopt its one-child policy, the most famous example of a state response to the population hysteria. The reversal ushered in myriad accounts of forced abortions, (usually female) infanticide, and so on. (When China changed to a two-child policy, Ehrlich cried out on Twitter, "GIBBERING INSANITY – THE GROWTH-FOREVER GANG." A year later, he called for a global one-child policy.)

China's was far from the only repressive regime of population control. A recent *Smithsonian Magazine* article on the influence of Ehrlich's work recounts a few examples:

In Egypt, Tunisia, Pakistan, South Korea and Taiwan, health workers' salaries were, in a system that invited abuse, dictated by the number of IUDs they inserted into women. In the Philippines, birth-control pills were literally pitched out of helicopters hovering over remote villages. Millions of people were sterilized, often coercively, sometimes illegally, frequently in unsafe conditions, in Mexico, Bolivia, Peru, Indonesia and Bangladesh.

In the 1970s and '80s, India, led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay, embraced policies that in many states required sterilization for men and women to obtain water, electricity, ration cards, medical care and pay raises. Teachers could expel students from school if their parents weren't sterilized. More than eight million men and women were sterilized in 1975 alone. ("At long last," World Bank head Robert McNamara remarked, "India is moving to effectively address its population problem.")

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Global population has doubled since *The Population Bomb* was published, and India's has nearly tripled, yet none of the Ehrlichs' hysterical predictions has come true. In fact, the trend has been in the opposite direction: female mortality rates have more than halved, famines are rarer, and food production has increased dramatically. The three most densely populated places are Monaco, Macau, and Singapore . . . none of which is exactly a post-apocalyptic wasteland. The reality is that, as the economist Julian Simon noted, "whatever the rate of population growth is, the food supply increases at an even faster rate." Human ingenuity is an underappreciated resource. Since the 1960s, the freedom to trade globally has increased drastically, allowing food and supplies to make their way throughout the world and generating a pathway for the poorest people to have a market to sell their own goods.

At its best, science fiction allows readers and watchers to confront real-world ideas in a way that is divorced from the context of the real world. I imagine that most viewers, like the protagonists

of the film, recoil at Thanos's plan, presented starkly and without scientific euphemism, which rests on the central argument that people must be culled for their own good. The same framing ought to be applied whenever the anti-population crusade rears its head in real life.