

When the Heroes Win, Everybody Loses



Thanos, the main antagonist. Courtesy Walt Disney Studios

Human overpopulation is real; it's serious and needs to be humanely handled by conscientious and thoughtful individuals. Thanos from the Avengers movies is neither one of those things. He recognized the problem but acted viciously on his "solution." He phased out of existence 50% of all intelligent life on the Universe. What Thanos ended up doing right was starting a meaningful conversation, even though many have taken the opportunity to bury their heads deeper.

If you are like me, you're probably a fan of the successful and popular Marvel franchise that has spawned close to 20 movies leading to last year's *Avengers: Infinity War*, which is being followed by its sequel, *Avengers: Endgame*. If you aren't that big of an admirer, don't worry because this piece isn't an examination of either one of the movies, but of the *interim* that separated them and the discussions it originated.

For many years Marvel had been held for questioning by fans as to why they couldn't create an unforgettable and meaningful antagonist. That all went away when Thanos (pictured above) arrived at the scene and purposely [said](#):

"Dread it, run from it, destiny arrives all the same.

And now it's here. Or should I say, I am."

Thanos befittingly delivered on this promise. He came bearing the ultimate villainous project of snuffing out of existence fifty percent of all living beings in the Universe, with a literal snap of his fingers. His ratiocination?

"This Universe is finite. Its resources finite. If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correction."

Thanos is, of course, talking about overpopulation and how the exponential growth of a species (such as us humans) doubtlessly ends up outstripping available resources and inducing devastation.

I won't argue here if human overpopulation is indeed an emergency in need of being addressed or just some misleading machination since I've already [written](#) extensively about it and the jury is unequivocally out on that one. It should also go without saying that the genocidal path taken by Thanos is excoriated and chastised by people who worry about human overpopulation and our impact on this Earth, so that's it for our moral analysis.

What I will do instead is go over some of the publications that were brought about from Thanos' resolve in the mainstream media, which have an overwhelming reach and influence when compared to the scholar and activist spheres. The majority of these editorials were inconceivably depreciative of the population issue, using the opportunity to disparage individuals such as Reverend Thomas Malthus and Professor Paul Ehrlich for raising awareness on the subject. Nonetheless, I still want to argue that – in spite of their attempts – this past year has been a favorable epoch in the contentious discussion of our numbers. Sadly, it might be coming to an end.

In a *Yale Climate Connections* [piece](#), Michael Svodoba asserts that the more likely outcome is that the examinations over the environmental concerns raised by Thanos will, presumably, crumble to dust after the villain is taken care of. Svodoba argues that this means there is a limited time-window for the franchise to vindicate the cliché affinity of environmentalists with mass murder solutions. I also share his anxiety and take it a step further.

My guess is that the [massive enthusiasm](#) (e.g. Reddit's [Thanos did nothing wrong](#)) surrounding the issue of overpopulation was made possible not just because Thanos was the ultimate 'utilitarian' (he reasoned that by halving the Universe's intelligent life he would prevent their numbers from rising to unsustainable levels leading to an overshoot of their resources and creating calamity and the death of many more in the process. This notion of the means justify righteous ends appears to be quite appealing to people) but because the heroes lost. For an entire year, fans were left in this limbo wondering about the fate of their noble figures, which produced a barrage of scrutiny over Thanos' motivations and a nuanced take on his character.

For example, take [this](#) interview with Josh Brolin in *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. Brolin is the voice behind our antagonist and speaks his mind about Thanos' popularity:

- *"People saw the movie, and they felt sympathetic towards him, they had a multitude of reactions to him, and it wasn't just 'he is the worst guy in the Universe.'"*

Through the process of creating this character, he appears to have become conscious of the obstacles facing unlimited growth. Brolin explains Thanos' convictions:

- *"His intention, if you think about it was, there is an overabundance of population, and there are limited resources. So what he is doing is actually right."*

Colbert intervenes and asks Brolin why didn't Thanos just double the resources with a snap of his fingers? This was a [recurring point](#) in many other different publications. Thanos ought to have multiplied the available resources instead of resorting to mass genocide. Indubitably, genocide was an unacceptable option, but the alternative of doubling/tripling/quadrupling and so forth is defective just the same.

If we recall the late physics professor Albert Bartlett's [thought experiment](#) of bacteria in a bottle and exponential growth, we know how he entrusted us with the crucial understanding of steady growth of population on a finite environment. To demonstrate, the bacteria fill up the bottle at midnight, one minute before they are half-way there, prior two minutes they have occupied 25% and so on. Following that reasoning environmentalist David Suzuki [addresses](#) this point of the multiplication of resources regularly alluded to. Suzuki plainly identifies the problem. At one 00:01 the population would have doubled again and at 00:02 the quadrupling of resources would be exhausted. How long would Thanos have to keep this up?

On the positive side, one levelheaded publication arising from *Infinity War* is a YouTube video by content creator [Joe Scott](#). As of the time of this writing, the video 'The Population Explosion – Was Thanos Right?' had amassed more than 140,000 views and above 1600 comments. In it, *Joe Scott* discusses population data, projections and the history without the need to *ad hominem* his way into this exchange of ideas.

Likewise, a [video](#) by content creator *Mr. Sinn* looks at historical events, specifically the Black Death, and attempts to rationalize if halving a given population – as Thanos has done - would produce any beneficial results for those that would survive. *Mr. Sinn* goes on to explain the relationship between supply and demand that ensued this epidemic episode, unleashing an event of prosperity for the majority of the population. Relying on the work from Medieval Economics expert A.R. Bridbury, published on *JSTOR* in [1977](#), *Mr. Sinn* explains how the steep decline in population induced land, homes and food prices to substantially decrease. Simultaneously, wages went up as much as 40%, according to David Routt from the University of Richmond, whose [research](#) is also featured in the video (more on the aftermath of the Black Death [here](#)).

On the other hand, one sober [piece](#) by Steven L. Wilson in *Pajiba* did a 'rigorous' thought experiment of the scientific merit of Thanos' Snap, and found it "atrociously considered from a scientific perspective that it is as unforgivable a policy as it was an ethical act." In detail, Wilson asserts that population die-offs such as the one experienced in the 14th century Europe don't halt population growth for long since in a mere eighty years the population attained its pre-plague level. This is exactly the point poignantly argued by Svoboda in [Yale Climate Connections](#):

"If a society somehow managed to survive the shock, its population would likely again grow past the point of sustainability – unless it chose to manage its affairs differently."

Phil Newell in [Nexus Media](#) correctly adds:

"Contraception and education offer a more sustainable solution than anything Thanos might suggest."

Writing for [Forbes](#), JV Chamary does outline the issue with a collected style while also introducing an ample range of topics such as the seeming difficulty in pointing out the discrepancy in fertility rates between the developed and developing world, out of fear of being interpreted as racism, or the concept of carrying capacity. Unfortunately, Chamary brushes-off concerns over limited resources as possibly "irrelevant" since humans can engineer and employ artificial means to sustain populations beyond the natural limits. Similarly, he correctly points out that the proportion of undernourished people has dwindled from [37%](#) (between 1969-71) to [11%](#) in (2017), but neglected to recognize that in terms of absolute numbers there

was less of a discernible achievement to be celebrated ([875 million](#) in 1969-71 and [820.8](#) in 2017, with this number on the rise since 2014).

In reality, the United Nations [highlighted](#) in early April 2019 that population growth is having profound implications on some Sustainable Development Goals such as poverty, child marriage and people living in improvised slums. UN Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed [summarized](#) it as such:

“While the percentage of affected persons may be declining, their number is still rising. It is time for the world to show greater ambition and urgency around SDG implementation...”

Sadly, if we follow publication examples coming out of media platforms such as [Forbes](#); [Foundation for Economic Education](#); [Mashable](#); [Vice](#); [Reason](#); [The Federalist](#); [Wall Street Journal](#); [Medium](#); [Zero Hedge](#) it certainly isn't looking like we are displaying this “greater ambition and urgency around SDG implementation” since most of these pieces belittle, discredit or oversimplify worries about human population. A telling example from the [Vice piece](#) mentioned above titled *I Asked an Expert if Thanos is Right* writes:

“I called up an economics researcher specializing in population issues. Let's start off with a simple one: Are there too many people in the world right now?”

- No.”

Instead of examining issues such as the [societal](#) and [psychological](#) burdens of overpopulation; the [current overshoot](#) of our global ecological footprint; or how the need to [feed](#), clothe and provide dignified lives to each and every one of us is having profound environmental consequences, the authors and experts cited throughout the pieces prefer to deposit all hope on human ingenuity, regardless of their results:

- “The caloric output of current agriculture is more than enough to feed everyone, and most of the world is nowhere near maximum theoretical yields with even current technology.” ([Vice](#))

- “And here's the rub: more people means more ideas and more progress. So while there are environmental costs from having a larger population, there are also environmental gains. The bottom line is that it's not more people that harm the environment, it's overconsumption and pollution.” ([Forbes](#))

- “Always remember that more people doesn't just mean more mouths to feed, it also means more minds to create and more hands to build.” ([Foundation for Economic Education](#))

- “As it turned out, though, Malthus and his successors hadn't reckoned with human ingenuity. Every time we think we've hit a wall in terms of food production, we come up with new technology and new efficiencies – just as we did in the so-called Green Revolution of intensive agriculture in the 1960s and 1970 that put paid to the “population bomb” problem.” ([Mashable](#))

More examples of population thoughtlessness abound, but I'll leave [those](#) for the more inquisitive readers. Fortunately, articles such as [Is Thanos Right?](#) by James O'Malley give a more detailed and refined take on the link between our growing numbers and the consumption which inevitably unravels. O'Malley was even considerate enough to interview Alistair Currie, Head of Campaigns and Communication at [Population Matters](#) to get to the bottom of this story. Alistair adverts to the criticalness of the situation but also concentrates on our best set of strategies to ameliorate some of the damage, such as providing modern family planning, good education, empowerment of girls and women and the challenge of pro-natalist views.

In any event, I am delighted by the fictional artwork that the franchise has brought into existence, even though it is regrettable that this 'Golden Age' of renewed interest in human overpopulation might be coming to an end as soon as the heroes correct the narrative and reinstate the *status quo* of blissful ignorance. I for one would wish for this hiatus to last a while longer, as I am sure everyone would benefit from the rational deliberations arising from Thanos' actions.

João Abegão has a BS in Environmental Health, a Masters in Ecology and Environment and is currently applying for a doctoral program in "Sustainable Development and Climate Change" and plans to focus his studies on overpopulation. His interest in Human Overpopulation arose from literature like Life on the Brink - Environmentalists Confront Overpopulation and authors Jeffrey McKee, Dave Foreman, Eileen Crist, Albert Bartlett, Lester Brown, Alan Weisman, Karen Shragg, and many others whose contributions inspired João to write his own Human Overpopulation Atlas. João plans to continue researching, writing and advocating on human overpopulation and its many implications for the future.