

The Population Bomb . . . Defused

by R. Cort Kirkwood

Repetition is the mother of learning, and there are some popular beliefs that have no basis in fact, but which many Americans simply accept at face value because the news media has repeated them so many times in so many different ways. One such belief is that spaceship Earth has too many inhabitants, that the developing world's population growth inhibits economic development, and that everyone might run out of food, water and natural resources if something isn't done to stop Africans and Latin Americans from having babies.

Just a few months ago, the United Nations released an alarmist report saying the world's population will reach 10 billion by 2025 and 14 billion by 3000 if women everywhere don't start using more and better birth control techniques. The headlines were predictable. Ask average people on the street whether population growth is a problem, and they will answer, yes—faster than they can tell you what team Mickey Mantle played for, or who wrote *Huckleberry Finn*.

"The population bogey has been the rare sweet issue everyone could agree upon," says University of Maryland economist Julian Simon, yet a more mythical bogeyman could hardly be found. Though the population controllers such as International Planned Parenthood, The Population Institute, and the Population Crisis Committee have had the media's ear since World War II, thinking economists and demographers have destroyed the theory that population growth inhibits economic growth. How? As the American

Enterprise Institute's Nicholas Eberstadt puts it: "That corpus of knowledge simply does not exist. So what you have is pseudoscience. Modern witchcraft."

The ingredients in the population bombers' brew are as strange as those used in witchcraft: eye of newt, crushed bat wings, and whatever else it is they toss in the pot, except the population bombers mix a concoction of Malthusianism, socialism, and economic globaloney that emerges from their kettle as an oracle of doom.

Says Sharon Camp of the Population Crisis Committee: "There are too many people trying to eke out a living at current technology. . . . We don't know what will happen to the natural resource base at a population level of 8, 9, 10, 14 billion."

Without an increase in U.S. assistance for United Nations population programs, Nafis Sadik of the United Nations Population Fund warned, "we will continue to experience high population growth, high infant and child mortality, weakened economies, ineffective agriculture, divided societies and a poorer quality of life for women, children and men."

Barber Conable, president of the World Bank, said in a September 1988 address to the bank's Board of Governors: "The societies in which population is growing so fast must accept that many—perhaps most—of these new lives will be miserable, malnourished and brief. With today's population growth rates, badly needed improvements in living standards cannot be achieved, public resources for necessary services are overstretched, and the environment is severely damaged."

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Wrote Loretta McLaughlin in *The Boston Globe*, "It is the pressure of the world's burgeoning population—more than any other single force—that fuels inflation and economic recession. All nations must compete harder for dwindling supplies of the earth's resources; worldwide, more workers must compete for proportionately fewer jobs."

In the same article she quoted Conable's predecessor, Robert McNamara, who best crystallized the population bombers' mantra: "The population problem must be faced up to for what it is—the greatest single obstacle to the economic and social advancement of peoples in the developing world. It is the population explosion, more than anything else, which by holding back the advancement of the poor, is blowing apart the rich and poor and widening the already dangerous gap between them."

Is Population Growth the Culprit?

It would be truly sad if all these things were true, but they aren't. All the available data suggest that population growth has nothing to do with economic growth, infant mortality, or any of the other ugly conditions in which much of the world's population lives, especially the Third World.

For example, population planners say too many people will "deplete our limited quantities of food, water and fuel" and other nonrenewable resources. Yet the prices of most commodities (except fuel, thanks to government energy policies and the OPEC cartel), are gradually falling in real terms. If prices are a measure of scarcity, then the world's increasing population is hardly a threat. Population growth statistics really tell observers only one thing: there are more people today than there were yesterday.

Most of the dire predictions are about Africa and Latin America, where huge populations and mass starvation seem to go hand in hand. According to The Population Institute, "There is no simple explanation for why Africa's economic development has been stunted and why Africans today remain so grievously poor. Lack of capital and highly skilled personnel is a factor. . . . ongoing civil strife. . . . staggering external debts. . . . colonial exploitation. . . . degradation of . . . its natural resource base. . . . Somewhere in the mix

of these factors is the wellspring of Africa's woes." But the real "wellspring of the continent's woes" is never discussed.

Warning that Ethiopia's population of 49 million will double in 23 years, the Institute reports, "The Ethiopian government acknowledges that the country's three percent population growth rate is imperiling its people and their development hopes. . . . There is clearly no way Ethiopia could support that many people. Ethiopia has only two choices: undertake far more vigorous efforts to extend family planning or face even larger-scale suffering in the near future."

But overpopulation is hardly Ethiopia's problem. The Institute and its ideological kin simply ignore Ethiopia's brutal collectivization of agriculture, a throwback to the days of Stalin and the Ukrainian famine even the Soviets have advised the Mengistu regime to stop. The government has deliberately turned mild droughts into nationwide famines and killed thousands of people in forced relocation programs to deprive anti-government guerrillas of crucial rural support.

It is widely known that the Communist authorities use relief food as a lure, stationing supplies near pickup areas for the relocation program. The ultimate goal is to move 33 million people. Not surprisingly, *The Washington Post* reported in 1987, the per capita availability of grain had dropped 22 percent in 10 years, and even though state-owned farms were using 40 percent of all government expenditures, they contributed only four or five percent of total food production. Private farmers—the few that there were—were generating 40 percent of the country's nearly nonexistent gross national product.

Yet The Population Institute says Ethiopia needs more condoms and birth control pills: "Had Ethiopia launched a family planning program in the mid-1960s and had that program been half as successful as many that were begun at that time, the number of births prevented would have been equal to the number of Ethiopians dependent upon food relief during the last famine." That's what you call pseudoscience.

The Institute is also worried about Ghana, "the second fastest growing [population] in western Africa" at 3.3 percent, but credits the Ghanaian government with a hands-on approach to family planning.

Yet as Nicholas Eberstadt notes in the Winter

1986 *Wilson Quarterly*, when Ghana was decolonized and Kwame Nkrumah took the reins of power, he systematically destroyed the economy with socialist interventions. He “forced the farmers to sell their cocoa, the nation’s chief export, at a fixed price to the government, which then sold it abroad at a profit. The proceeds were poured into Nkrumah’s industrial development schemes. By the late 1970s . . . Ghana’s small cocoa farmers were getting less than 40 percent of the world price for their crop—an effective tax of over 60 percent. Not surprisingly, Ghana’s cocoa output and cocoa exports plummeted.”

Next Nkrumah “took aim at industry. Shortly after independence, he nationalized the nation’s foreign-owned gold and diamond mines, cocoa-processing plants, and other enterprises. Ghana’s new infant industries were also state-owned. The result was inefficiency on a monumental scale. According to one study, between 65 percent and 71 percent of Ghana’s publicly owned factory capacity lay idle 10 years after independence. . . . By 1978, tax revenues paid less than 40 percent of the government’s budget. Inflation spiraled, climbing by over 30 percent a year during the 1970s. . . . Black Africa’s most promising former colony had become an economic disaster.”

But The Population Institute concludes, “where population growth is the fastest—Africa—per capita food production is in the sharpest decline.”

Some Surprising Comparisons

The Institute’s 1988 report on Africa ignores South Africa, which isn’t surprising. Its population, one of the continent’s highest, has doubled since 1960, yet its per capita gross national product in 1986 was \$1,850. Ghana’s and Ethiopia’s populations have doubled as well, but their per capita GNP’s are \$390 and \$120 respectively. People aren’t Africa’s problem, government policies are. Even South Africa’s racist apartheid system hasn’t done the damage Ethiopia’s Communist dictatorship has. In fact, if the government of South Africa ever dismantled the apartheid system, allowing blacks even more economic freedom than they have now, the contrast would be even more dramatic . . . and more embarrassing for the population bombers.

Africa’s story is only a snapshot of a worldwide

phenomenon. Comparing other countries in the second and first worlds yields similar results. As shown by the table on page 444, the differences between Taiwan, Singapore, and China, between North Korea and South Korea, and between East Germany and West Germany are equally startling, especially when population density is brought into the equation. Where China has enough room to put 285 people per square mile, its economy is a failure next to Taiwan’s and Singapore’s, whose people are packed in like sardines, but whose economies have become known as two of Asia’s four “dragons.” (The other two being Hong Kong and South Korea.)

These small islands also belie the myth that urban congestion in “Third World mega-cities” such as Mexico City and New Delhi is a threat to public health, education, and housing needs. Need we ask why South Korea, which is more than twice as crowded as North Korea, is doing twice as well economically? Population planners try to explain the differences by saying the successful economies of Asia and Africa benefited from strong, government-backed family planning programs. But the population growth rates of the African countries, East and West Germany, the Koreans, and the Pacific rim countries were pretty much the same from 1960 to 1986. That leaves only one explanation for the differences, one the table doesn’t show, one the population bombers don’t like to discuss: China, Ethiopia, and the other economic failures are controlled by Communist or socialist central planners, whereas Taiwan, Singapore, and the other economic engines of progress are largely free market economies.

As Julian Simon has written, “Population growth under an enterprise system poses less of a problem in the short run, and brings many more benefits in the long run, than under conditions of government planning of the economy.” Adds Eberstadt, “the overall impact of population change on a society seems to depend on how the society deals with change of all kinds. Indeed, coping with fluctuations in population is in many ways less demanding than dealing with the almost daily uncertainties of the harvest, or the ups and downs of the business cycle, or the vagaries of political life. Societies and governments that meet such challenges successfully as the little dragons did, are also likely to adapt well to population change. Those that do not are likely to find

that a growing population 'naturally' causes severe, costly and prolonged dislocations." (*Wilson Quarterly*, Winter 1986) In short, free societies adjust well to population increases, Communist societies do not.

The population bombers would be little more than harmless "do-gooders" if their ideas—that people cause inflation, that people consume too much food, that people are a drag on economic development—were not taken so seriously. But they are taken seriously, and the consequences have been disastrous, anti-natalist, even inhuman.

Eberstadt cites a March 1986 *Washington Post* report from Kenya: "hundreds of [rural school] children ran screaming, some scrambling through windows, with the approach of an unfamiliar car: it was thought to contain population workers who would inject them with nonreversible contraceptives. The previous year starving Kenyans in drought-afflicted areas were reported to have refused relief shipments of U.S. corn on the rumor that the corn had been laced with sterilizants." (*Foreign Aid and American Purpose*, p. 96)

Family Planning in China

But the worst application of population control theory is that of the Communist Chinese government, which has been cited by the U.S. House of Representatives for "crimes against humanity" in carrying out its one-family, one-child policy. In collecting 92 accounts from eyewitnesses, human rights activist Dr. Blake Kerr reported the ghastly results in *The Washington Post* (February 26, 1989): "In the autumn of 1987," two Tibetan monks told Kerr, "a Chinese birth-control team set up their tent next to our monastery in Amdo. The villagers were informed that all women had to report to the tent for abortions and sterilizations or there would be grave consequences. . . . We saw many girls crying, heard their screams as they waited for their turn to go into the tent, and saw the growing pile of fetuses build outside the tent."

Elsewhere in China, in pursuit of its U.N.-backed family planning program, the results are the same: forced sterilization, abortion and outright infanticide. In many cases, doctors perform "abortions" as a child is moving through the birth

	Population per square mile	GNP per capita
East Germany	399.0	\$10,400
West Germany	634.5	12,080
North Korea	448.0	1,180
South Korea	1,095.5	2,370
China	285.0	300
Taiwan	1,385.6	3,748
Ghana	142.9	390
South Africa	68.4	1,850
Singapore	11,608.4	7,410
Ethiopia	92.2	120
Mozambique	45.8	210

Sources: The Heritage Foundation, The World Bank Annual Development Report 1988; Figures from 1986.

canal at term, crushing its skull with a forceps or jamming a hypodermic needle filled with formaldehyde into the fontanelle, killing the child just moments before it enters the world. Others who make it past the doctor are often confronted by the nurse, and women have heard their child's first cries on beginning life only to see them snuffed out by that nurse, who is usually armed with what has become known as "the poison shot."

The justification for this mass murder? According to Chen Muhua, head of China's Family Planning Board, "Socialism should make it possible to regulate the reproduction of human beings so that population growth keeps in step with the growth of material production."

Lest you think such exhortations are *sui generis*, look at the words of Friends of the Earth as published in *Progress As If Survival Mattered*: "Americans should take the lead in adopting policies that will bring reduced population. Ultimately, those policies *may* have to embrace coercion by governments to curb breeding. . . . mere unofficial advocacy and purely voluntary compliance are far from enough . . . voluntarism guarantees big families for the ignorant, the stupid, and the conscienceless, while it gradually reduces the proportion of people who, in conscience, limit the size of their families. . . . If the less stringent curbs on procreation fail, someday perhaps childbearing will be deemed a punishable crime against society unless the parents hold a government license. Or perhaps all potential parents will be

required to use contraceptive chemicals, the governments issuing antidotes to citizens chosen for child bearing.”

The population bombers cannot imagine that an Ethiopian mother might love her children just as much the sterilization advocate living at the Watergate, that children provide a source of non-material income they don't understand. For them, there are only “unwanted” pregnancies; as George Gilder put it, “mouths, not minds.” No wonder they can make pseudoscientific statements like, “500 million women want and need family planning but lack information, access or means to obtain it.” In this view, people aren't producers, they're consumers.

If such is the case then the effort to preserve

man's finite resources must go beyond mere contraception and the legal elimination of “unwanted” children by abortion. In allocating our supposedly meager resources, judicious authorities would allow only the most learned, polished, and beautiful people to reproduce, for it is they who will use resources most expediently and they who need them most. After all, as devoted friends of the earth say, a system of “voluntarism” would empower the “stupid and ignorant” (the teeming masses of Latin America and Africa?) to waste our dwindling resources.

Effective population control logically demands that we control not only the number of people on earth, but the kind of people who live on it. And that is a recipe for tyranny. □

IDEAS ON LIBERTY



The Ultimate Weapon

The development of the population control movement should not come as a surprise. For it is, in fact, the logical outcome as well as the final gasp of the liberal Welfare State of today. Supposedly, the basic purpose of the Welfare State is to succor those who cannot take care of themselves, the poor, the elderly, the handicapped. But Garrett Hardin tells us that because of the inevitable “tragedy of the commons” in which the “freedom to breed” inexorably conflicts with equal rights to the common welfare, this Welfare State goal will bring ruin. So, to save its own skin, the Welfare State begins practicing not welfare but “wombfare,” destroying rather than nurturing its young.

However, the “tragedy of the commons” is not a justification for population control. It is rather a call for the elimination of the Welfare State. This is because the Welfare State is in the long run a way not of helping people but controlling them. And population control is the last desperate act and ultimate weapon of a Welfare State whose lust for power and instinct for survival knows no political or moral limits.

What population control boils down to is a blatant and brutal attempt to solve problems not by alleviating the conditions that cause them, but by eliminating the people who have the problems. But the idea of eliminating problems by getting rid of people is not new. The concept has been with us always.

—JAMES A. WEBER, *Grow or Die!*

Private Property from Soweto to Shanghai

by David Boaz

A trip around the world provides evidence of just how wrong Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith was in his influential book *The Affluent Society*. (Granted, one need not go nearly so far to find such evidence.)

Galbraith observed that everywhere one looked, privately provided goods and services—homes, automobiles, factories, “handsomely packaged products”—were clean, shiny, and of high quality. Yet publicly provided services—schools, parks, streets—were old, overcrowded, and poorly maintained. Galbraith called it “an atmosphere of private opulence and public squalor.”

From those accurate if unremarkable observations, Galbraith drew the remarkably misguided conclusion that the problem was too little spending on the public sector. It seems astonishing today that a brilliant man could have gone so far astray; after all, the economic theory of private property was well known 30 years ago—but maybe not at Harvard. His book, published in 1958, had a great deal of influence on the explosion in government spending over the next decade. We are still paying a heavy price—in high taxes and poor public services—for Galbraith’s error.

We are now spending much more on the public sector than we were 30 years ago—real government spending has increased from \$528 billion in 1958 to \$1,640 billion in 1988—yet government services are still shoddy, overcrowded, and poorly maintained.

The reason—which Galbraith missed completely—is that shoddiness is inherent in government ownership because of a lack of incentives. Homeowners generally take good care of their property—they paint the house regularly, fix the roof, plant grass and trees, and call a plumber promptly when they discover a leak. Why? Because they are the sole claimants to the property’s value. If they try to sell their property, they will reap the benefits of the house’s good condition or pay a price for its disrepair. Tenants tend to take less care of their homes, though landlords generally check on the condition of the property regularly. Tenants in government housing show the least concern for the condition of their homes—and because there’s no owner who would pay a price for the declining value of the property, no one else has much incentive to improve it. And public housing is always in disrepair, to say the least.

Most privately owned stores are clean and well lit with friendly, helpful clerks—at least compared with, say, the post office. The Postal Service doesn’t seek out rude and indifferent employees; it’s just that neither its clerks nor their supervisors have anything to gain by treating customers well. On a recent trip around the world, I found shop clerks in Shanghai just as indifferent to customers as U.S. postal workers.

It is economic analysis and, more important, such observations that have created a worldwide trend toward privatization. The Thatcher government has sold public housing units to their tenants, sold Great Britain’s largest trucking company to its employees, and sold the telephone company to private shareholders. Japan recently

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