

## Letters to the Editor

EDITOR:

The contents of the Spring 1999 issue of *The Social Contract* are excellent and have opened my eyes to so many things I never knew but should have known. For example, C. P. Snow was only a name to me, but what wonderful ideas have evolved in this issue from his "Two Cultures" essay.

Sincerely,

GEORGE E. IMMERWAHR

Kenmore, Washington

[Editor's Note: George Immerwahr has been involved in demographic research at the University of Washington. His newest book, *World Population Growth*, is available through the *Social Contract Press*, 1-800-352-4843.]

EDITOR:

Jonette Christian's "A Liberal's Re-thinking — Speech Before a Maine Unitarian Congregation" (*The Social Contract*, Fall, 1998) is an excellent, gratifyingly brief and well-written summary of the arguments for halting American population growth and, to that end, reforming American immigration policies.

But I am concerned about two aspects of this essay. The first (and less important) is her apparent animosity toward political liberals. Ms Christian might well have a problem with her own "liberal" parents, but why must she subject her listeners/readers to such an irrelevancy as this: "...I learned from [the example of] my own parents, in some situations there is nothing more sanctimonious nor close-minded than a devout liberal who is convinced of the moral authority of his own opinion"? (One wonders what she might say about non-liberals after listening to the recent impeachment hearings.) To be sure, as she notes in this context, many liberals supported President Johnson on the Vietnam War. Yet, as one of many who opposed Johnson on that issue right from the start, I must remind Ms Christian that any analysis of Congressional voting records, public opinion polls and the like will show that the earliest, most enthusiastic, and most persistent support for America's shameful

actions in Vietnam came from the opposite end of the political spectrum.

But the more important of my two concerns about the essay is its implication that views on population and, specifically, immigration can be categorized along some liberal/conservative, left/right continuum. Perhaps more than any other political issue now before us, this population/immigration issue makes for strange bedfellows. It does so in the United States and, in my judgment based on 23 years' residence there, also in the world's major per capita immigration country — Australia.

The line-ups take much the same form in both countries. The pro-immigrationists consist, essentially, of: (a) members of ethnic groups who want more of their kind, (b) businessmen who want more tractable, non-unionized, harder-working (preferably with less pay) workers, as well as workers trained elsewhere at someone else's expense, (c) economists who value only what can be measured by narrow economic indicators, have an abiding faith in The Market to right all imbalances and scarcities, and see population increase as essentially an addition to the potential workforce, and (d) kind-hearted people who, while of the opinion that rich countries should help alleviate poverty elsewhere in the world, lack any real understanding of geometric growth rates and demographic momentum, and have little knowledge either of ecological or social limits or of ways to alleviate poverty by other than moving people out of one country and into another. In Australia, there is a fifth component, mostly consisting of "intellectuals" who, mindful of the history of the infamous "white Australia" policy, are terrified of being branded racist. In the United States, a fifth component consists mostly of Jews who — quite understandably — remember what befell their kinsmen and co-religionists who did not emigrate from Europe during the Nazi period.

The "anti"-immigrationists, on the other hand, consist, essentially, of (a) various racists and xenophobes, (b) workers who see immigrants as economic competitors and "rate-busters," (c) people who put a particularly high (perhaps unrealistically

high) value on social cohesiveness and stability, (d) “greenies” who see population increase (from whatever source) as threatening the natural environment and the related ways of life they value, and (e) scientists, particularly in biology and ecology, who are aware of limits and how these are being massively pushed against by accelerating increases in population and consumption the world over.

These are not mutually exclusive categories, either within the “pro-” or the “anti-” camp. It’s conceivable that one could even be a part of both camps. What position one occupies along the immigration policy continuum will depend on the relative weights one assigns each of his or her interests.

Sincerely,  
LINCOLN DAY  
Washington, D.C.

[*Editor’s note: Lincoln Day is the co-author, with Alice Taylor Day, of Too Many Americans (Houghton-Mifflin, 1964); and author of The Future of Low-Birthrate Populations (Routledge, 1992). We invited Jonette Christian to respond...*]

EDITOR:

Thank you for sharing the letters you received concerning my piece, “A Liberal’s Re-thinking.” I would like to make a few comments in response to Mr. Day’s letter.

When I made this speech in my Unitarian church a year ago, I felt I needed to say something that might challenge the “brick wall” that I kept running into when I tried to talk to liberals about immigration. This was not a speech for a general audience. It was an in-house conversation in which I hoped to provoke my fellow liberals to examine their own views. The people who came were very responsive. At some points there was laughter and “Amen.” But only a small number of people came to this talk, despite the fact that I had enlisted the minister, and from the pulpit she had invited people to attend. Not one member of the church who had not attended the talk requested a copy of the tape when it was offered, or asked me questions about the subject. The minister told me that five members came to her and voiced the opinion that this talk should not be allowed to happen

in our church, but she courageously stood by me.

My family have been Unitarians for three generations. I have never heard of any subject which aroused a request to censor a speech in a Unitarian church. Unitarians ordinarily consider themselves great champions of free speech, and sermons about respecting diversity are standard fare. This was a church in which Fundamentalists were often criticized for their doctrinaire ideology, and I was growing increasingly irritated with the hypocrisy of my own people.

Why are political and religious liberals so resistant to this subject? They are blinded by the moral beauty [they exhibit] extending this breathtaking generosity to the Third World. And that is how they remain oblivious to everyone else, and justify their continued ignorance of this subject. Neither compassion for their own grandchildren nor rationality have influenced them at this point. I was hoping to find words to pierce that smug facade.

If this essay is to be used further, however, I would like to remove those passages which sound like liberal-bashing. It was originally written as an in-house conversation, and we speak more bluntly with our families in private than we do in public. Liberals and Unitarians are my people, and I must continue to find a way to reach them.

Sincerely,  
JONETTE CHRISTIAN  
Holden, Maine

#### **Respecting the Fault Lines Between Civilizations**

“The principal responsibility of Western leaders is not to attempt to reshape other civilizations in the image of the West, which is beyond their declining power, but to preserve, protect and renew the unique qualities of Western civilization.”

— Samuel P. Huntington in  
*The Clash of Civilizations and the  
Remaking of the World Order*  
Simon & Schuster

# An Epic Struggle

## *Sustainability and the emergence of a new social contract*

by John Cairns, Jr.

### Abstract

Human society is addicted to growth on a finite planet. As is often the case for psychological dependence, contrary evidence is ignored and wishes are confused with reality. When Malthus noted that exponential growth of the human population was a major problem, he was ridiculed and scorned -- a practice that has continued for two centuries. Those who believe in infinite substitutability of resources show no concern for the concept of sustainable use of the planet. This assertion has been termed *exemptionalism*, which holds that human ingenuity and technology provide continuing opportunity for economic growth and solutions for limits to growth; that economic activities create more than they destroy; and that the history of the world refutes claims of limits to growth, carrying capacity, and other assumptions of dependence on organic, natural systems. The opposing view, *environmentalism*, asserts that *Homo sapiens* is basically just another biological species that is tightly controlled by biophysical laws, despite its unique ability to modify natural systems more than any other species. Others believe that sustainability can be achieved by relatively modest changes in the present system. None of these groups has paid sufficient attention to the consequences of exponential growth of either human population or affluence. If human society continues on the present path — as many advocate — and this direction turns out to be wrong, cataclysmic events are highly probable. This scenario justifies the application of the term *epic*, since the transition will be traumatic

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rather than comfortable. The widespread expectation of economic growth rates of no less than 7 percent annually for some countries and no less than 10 percent for some industries simply cannot continue in a finite world. Some contrasting illustrative choices are provided here as a preliminary effort toward the development of a new social contract on the relationship of human society and natural systems.

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*The more optimistic the prediction the greater is the probability that it is based on faulty arithmetic or on no arithmetic at all.*

—Bartlett (1994)

**B**artlett (1997-98) is arguably the most outspoken critic of the loose, imprecise use of the term *sustainability*:

*And so we have a spectrum of uses of the term "sustainable." At one end of the spectrum, the term is used with precision by people who are introducing new concepts as a consequence of thinking profoundly about the long-term future of the human race. In the middle of the spectrum, the term is simply added as a modifier to the names and titles of very beneficial studies in efficiency, etc. that have been in progress for years. Near the other end of the spectrum, the term is used as a placebo. In some cases the term may be used mindlessly (or possibly with the intent to deceive) in order to try to shed a favorable light on continuing activities that may or may not be capable of continuing for long periods of time. At the very far end of the spectrum, we see the term used in a way that is oxymoronic (p.7).*

Development is customarily associated with growth. Sustainable development implies to many that minor adjustments in societal behavior are all that is