

(Published in the Canadian Forum, Sept. 1994)

POLICING POPULATION

Peter D. Gillespie

While on an extended trip to Bangladesh several years ago, I was invited to visit a women's development project in the Northwestern part of the country. I accepted the invitation and set out in the cool hours of an early morning, arriving in the village by mid-day.

I had anticipated being met by some of the women from the project and was somewhat disconcerted to be greeted by a group of men. The men explained that it would be unseemly for a foreigner to be met by village women. Moreover, they were the leaders of the community who had come together as the Board of Directors of the project due to their abiding concern for local women. After an excellent lunch, I was toured around the project and the Board members described their activities.

We came to a large, modern building and I was ushered inside. This was clearly the headquarters of the organization and the building was filled with office equipment, files and supplies. Against the interior walls, from floor to ceiling, were stacks of black binders. I inquired about these and the Chairman pulled down a binder to show me. Each page, he explained, recorded details of all the women in the area - their age, the number of children they had, their economic status, and whether they were using any form of contraception. The Chairman proudly explained that virtually every woman living in the area was represented in these binders. This was an impressive feat of data-gathering since the population of the district is close to a quarter of a million people.

We continued our tour and I was brought to an area where a group of women were sitting doing needle-point and basket-weaving. "One of our economic projects," the Chairman explained. "The women do this work and we market the products. In this way we help them

make some extra money." The only thing the organization asked in return was that the women agree to accept some form of contraception before joining the economic program.

I had seen enough. Sadly, this was yet another "women's development" project which did little to strengthen the independence of women or deal with the real issues of impoverishment and marginalization. I made some polite comments and left. It wasn't until I was some miles down the road that I realized what I had just seen. This organization had a data base on the reproductive history of virtually every woman in the district. Posing as a local project concerned with women's development issues, these people were merely distributing modern contraceptives. This was a population control project. I discovered later that this was one of thousands of identical projects throughout Bangladesh.

Over the years since then, I have talked with people in a half dozen countries about their experiences with population programs. There is a striking degree of similarity among the stories I have heard. In country after country, the language of women's development has been appropriated by institutions concerned with population control. These institutions routinely make references about women's empowerment and women's needs for greater choices. But behind this rhetoric is another reality.

Population control must be clearly distinguished from family planning. Family planning provides a range of contraceptive services in the context of a health program, is based on individual needs and choices, and emphasizes free and informed consent. Population control strategies, by contrast, are top-down and based on fertility regulation targets set by national governments and thus have little to do with the needs and desires of individuals. Population control programs rely on coercion to ensure that national targets are met and use a range of incentives and disincentives to promote sterilization or other long term methods of contraception. Population control programs rarely offer health support services or monitor the side effects of contraceptive drugs. Unlike family planning, population control does not expand the range of women's choices; rather, population control explicitly aims to *diminish* choice.

Not only is population control an infringement of reproductive freedom, but the history of population programs is one of abuse. It is a history of botched sterilizations leading to septic infections and sometimes death, of coercion and intimidation of poor and vulnerable women, of the use of modern contraceptives in the absence of health supervision. These are not isolated instances. Abuses have been well-documented in a number of countries and they are continuing. It is time that these population control practices, and the rationale upon which they are based, were exposed to public scrutiny.

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For the past several decades, many Third World countries have adopted population control as an important part of their national development strategies. With the advice of international organizations such as the World Bank, the UN Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Third World governments have accepted that economic development is impossible under conditions of rapid population growth. With increasing international attention to environmental issues, the rationale for population control has expanded to include environmental protection.

The view that rapid population growth is responsible for Third World poverty and environmental degradation is hardly new. While the simplicity of this perspective is compelling, the reality is that population issues are enormously complex. Despite the claims of economists, development experts and environmentalists, it is extremely difficult to demonstrate that population growth has a direct relationship to either economic development or environmental degradation. Nonetheless, we are repeatedly told that if population growth is not dramatically reduced, the world faces apocalypse.

Perspectives on population problems vary according to where you sit - and the view from the North is often different from that of the South. Many Southern activists have pointed out that

the preoccupation with Third World population growth diverts attention from the destructive consumption by the relatively small population of the affluent North. At the same time as Third World countries are being pressed to adopt population control policies, many economists are now worried about declining population growth which in most Northern countries has fallen below replacement level. Some Northern governments, including the Province of Quebec, are providing incentives to encourage people to have more children. Activist Farida Akhter of Bangladesh recently noted the irony that enormous resources are being spent in the North on research into technologies which increase the fertility of the wealthy, while in the South enormous resources are being spent on controlling the fertility of the poor.

Perspectives on population also vary according to economic ideology. The orthodox economic view is that a growing population inhibits development by diverting savings and investment capital to consumption, creating unemployment and underemployment, and limiting the ability of governments to invest in human development priorities. An alternative economic view, put forward by Julian Simon among others, suggests that some of these orthodox propositions are insupportable by empirical evidence; moreover, under certain conditions population growth can act as an economic stimulus by increasing demand, by creating economies of scale, and by expanding production. Proponents of this view point out that the surge in population growth in Western Europe during the past two centuries was accompanied by the fastest economic growth rates in history.

While there are dissenting views about the consequences of population growth, these views are rarely reported or debated in public fora. Judging from public attitudes, the apocalyptic view seems to have held sway. This is not surprising, given that enormous resources have been expended to promote this perspective. Aside from the billions spent selling the Cold War, it is likely that more resources have been spent promoting the over-population perspective than on virtually any other issue in modern history.

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THE ORIGINS OF AN IDEOLOGY

The intellectual debate about population size and population limits goes back as far as the idea of the Nation State. Plato argued that States must limit their populations in order to maintain harmony between nations. The scientific foundations of the population debate were laid by Robert Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), a British political economist who published the first version of his famous pamphlet *An Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798. Malthus's central thesis was that population increases geometrically, while the ability of the earth to provide sustenance increases only arithmetically. Human beings, he argued, are subject to the same natural laws as plants or animals. Malthus thought that the only preventive check to population growth was the "chaste postponement of marriage". The ultimate check, however, would be lack of food; people would breed up to the level of subsistence at which point population growth would be curtailed by natural forces.

Malthus's population theory has been enormously influential. It was Malthus who provided the framework for Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. But Malthus's ideas were also controversial. The political implications of his theory were clear: since population growth was highest among the poor, it is the reproduction of the poor which is of particular concern. Malthus was opposed to welfare benefits in part because this would encourage the continuing spiral of the poor begetting the poor. "Poverty", Malthus wrote, "has no direct relationship to the forms of government, or the unequal division of property; as the rich do not in reality possess the power of finding employment and maintenance for the poor, the poor cannot...possess the right to demand them; (these) are important truths flowing from the principle of population." In effect, Malthus's conservative political ideology was being wrapped in the respectable cloak of science.

Malthus was popularized in the post-World War Two era by a network of people concerned about rapid population growth in the Third World. Beginning in the early 1950s, a

population lobby developed which has become sophisticated and influential. The genesis of this movement can be traced to 1952 when John D. Rockefeller III convened a conference to consider the effects of population growth on human welfare. The main outcome of the conference was a recommendation to establish an international body to carry out population research and education. *The Population Council* was formed in the fall of 1952 and quickly became the pre-eminent international population institution and conduit of funds to an emerging network of population researchers and institutions. (The Population Council is now headed by Canada's former Deputy Minister of Health, Margaret Catley-Carlson.)

During this period, a business sector campaign was launched by Hugh Moore, a wealthy American entrepreneur who made his fortune marketing the Dixie Cup. Moore placed advertisements in major newspapers which likened the effects of population growth to a nuclear holocaust. As a result of Moore's leadership, corporate influence and resources became increasingly engaged in the population debate. Moore created the powerful lobby group *The Population Crisis Committee* whose membership was an impressive array of America's corporate and military elite.

This concerted campaign succeeded in persuading the US government to make a political commitment to the cause of population reduction. In 1965, President Johnson announced that the US would use its resources to deal with the "explosion" in world population. In the mid-1970s, President Ford endorsed the recommendations of *National Security Study Memorandum 200* which viewed Third World population growth as a threat to US economic and political interests. Ford ordered the launching of an international propaganda offensive on population matters by all US government agencies, including the State department, the CIA and the US Information Agency.

The most powerful international institution today financing population control is the World Bank. In its *1984 World Development Report*, the Bank makes a clear distinction between family planning and population control, and argues that the former is an insufficient

response to population pressures. The implementation of target-based population programs has become one of the conditions which the Bank places on access to some forms of loans. Between 1970 and 1991, the Bank had committed over \$1.3 billion to population projects in more than 14 countries.

Up until the 1980's, the activities of the population establishment remained virtually unchallenged. Women's organizations began to document the impact of population programs and a feminist critique developed, best represented by Betsy Hartmann's 1987 book *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*. Human rights groups began to sound the alarm about forced sterilization campaigns in places such as India, China and Brazil. But the mainstream attitude was that the end justified the means, that individual costs paled against the greater social good of bringing down birth rates. Backed by its neo-Malthusian science and its powerful advocates, the population industry prospered.

The scientific debate changed when Julian Simon, an economics professor now at the University of Maryland, issued his book *The Ultimate Resource*. In a challenge that has been likened to the famous Malthus-Godwin confrontation, Simon disputed the supposedly negative relationship between population growth and development. Building on the work of Simon Kuznets, Colin Clark and others, Simon concluded that there is no correlation between the rate of population growth and per capita income. Simon argued that the models upon which the orthodox assumptions are based are fundamentally flawed. Moreover, a growing population can, in the longer term, actually stimulate economic growth by increasing demand and by expanding production.

Simon's "revisionist" views were backed by a watershed report from the US National Academy of Sciences in 1986. The report examined nine areas in which it had been previously assumed that population growth has negative consequences. The report concluded that population growth, in and of itself, has only a modest impact on economic development or on the environment. The report noted that what is important "is the mediating role that human

behaviour and institutions play between population growth and economic processes." In other words, what matters is how societies and economies are organized, not the rate of population growth.

Simon's work and the National Academy report were greeted with consternation, even hysteria, by the population establishment. The scientific rationale of the entire population edifice was being seriously challenged. Swift rebuttals were made. Both Simon and the National Academy were accused of pandering to the Reagan anti-abortion right-wing. But the neo-Malthusians were on the defensive. In a recent review of the population debate, Allen Kelley of Duke University noted that the revisionist position is now widely-embraced among economic demographers.

Despite the fundamental challenge to the rationale for population control, population control policies are still being vigorously promoted. In the 1990's, however, the debate is shifting and population control advocates are proffering new arguments to bolster their cause. For example, the Population Crisis Committee (now called Population Action International) recently declared that population growth is a threat to democracy. The population establishment, incorporating the language of its feminist critics, now speaks about the importance of women's health and meeting the "unmet demand" for contraception. Yet this "unmet demand" is being met with new, long-lasting contraceptive technologies which not only raise major health questions but remove control from the user. Norplant, a sub-dermal implant developed by the Population Council and Canada's International Development Research Center, requires surgical implantation and removal and is now being widely used. New immunological contraceptives (vaccines) are being developed and field-tested. The potential for abuse of such technologies is already apparent - Norplant is being used in parts of the US on welfare mothers; in at least one case, a woman has received Norplant by court order. The brave new world of long-term, provider-dependent contraception has dawned.

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FROM POPULATION CONTROL TO BORDER CONTROL

Population control will be re-asserted as a global priority when representatives of governments from around the world meet in Cairo for the September 1994 *UN Conference on Population and Development*.

While there will be clarion calls for more resources devoted to population programs, at the top of the conference agenda is the issue of migration. Northern governments are increasingly concerned about the movements of Third World refugees to Europe and North America. Indeed, some European countries are virtually under seige as neo-Nazi and rightist groups have embarked on campaigns of violence against immigrants. Northern governments will insist that the Cairo conference ratify new international protocols to control the flow of Southern migrants.

The Government of Canada has been preparing for the Cairo conference. In 1992, the Department of External Affairs released a background policy paper entitled *World Population Growth and Population Movements: Policy Implications for Canada*. The paper starts with the standard alarmist propositions about the implications of world population growth, even audaciously declaring that population growth increases world economic imbalances and fuels Third World debt. The paper goes on to assert that rapid population growth fosters civil unrest and authoritarianism; significantly, the paper also worries about the demands being made by populous Third World countries for greater representation and democracy in the UN system.

The paper points out that increasing numbers of non-European refugees, especially Africans, have established a "bridgehead" in Canada and more will come. This may cause a negative reaction among Canadians. The paper recommends that Canada's refugee acceptance procedures be tightened to be more compatible with other Western nations. (This is precisely the

impact of Bill C-86, Canada's latest immigration legislation). Predictably, the paper also calls for a stronger commitment on the part of Canadian aid to population activities, especially in Africa.

The linkage between restricting the flow of Third World migrants and population control is clear. And there is an irony here too. The number of Third World refugees and potential migrants today is little greater than the millions of Europeans who emigrated in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries. Between 1815 and 1900, some 10 million people emigrated from the United Kingdom alone. But the days of mass migration are long over. In the era of globalization and free trade, it is only capital and goods which may pass unhindered across national borders.

From the perspective of Northern countries, the root causes of migration, whether political or economic, must be dealt with in the countries of origin. Yet at the same time, the development era is over. The commitment of the North to overseas development assistance is declining; Canada's aid program, for example, has been significantly reduced and many African countries are no longer eligible for assistance. In effect, the North has washed its hands of responsibility for conditions in the South.

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POPULATION OR POVERTY: WHAT IS THE QUESTION ?

Today I am standing in the marble and chrome foyer of the Ottawa headquarters of the International Development Research Center, Canada's prestigious international research organization. Under the attentive eye of a security guard, I am watching the digital clock mounted on the lobby wall. Rather than telling the time, this is a population clock. The clock tells me that the population of the world is 5.4 billion. The numbers turn over swiftly; within the

space of a minute, another 180 people have been added. Beneath the clock is another set of numbers representing the total arable land resources of the world; these numbers are slowly decreasing. The message is clear.

As I watch the clock, it occurs to me that the question first asked by Thomas Malthus is the wrong question. The question is not about human numbers and how many people can be supported by this earth. The question is about the *quality* of life which this earth will sustain. This is a moral question and one that can never be answered by science.

The real question is how much longer the existing world order can be sustained, an order which condemns one billion people to an existence on the very threshold of survival. How much longer can 15 percent of the population of the world control 80 percent of the world's income? How long can the world tolerate the malnutrition-related deaths of 14 million children a year while North Americans spend \$5 billion on special diets to *lower* their calorie intake? What does it say about the world order when, as Michel Chossudovsky has pointed out, the annual consumption of Pepsi and Coke by Americans is nearly twice the value of the GNP of Bangladesh?

The haemorrhage of capital out of the South that began in the late 1970's is now a torrent; currently, the net annual transfer from South to North is in the area of \$50 billion; this figure excludes the enormous losses the South has sustained from declining terms of trade. These resources could have been invested in schools, health and family planning programs, in skills training, in basic infrastructure, in agricultural and economic development. Instead, this massive outflow of capital has accrued to the benefit Northern banks and corporations. The solution of the North to the resulting economic crisis in the South has been to promote adjustment...and to blame the poor for their apparent profligacy.

Some of the advocates of population control do recognize the importance of economic justice and more equitable access to resources. However, they argue that population growth

rates must *first* be curtailed before we deal with the more difficult business of social justice. What is completely paradoxical about this argument is that it is only social justice and better access to resources which will bring down birth rates. The evidence clearly shows that it is through better access to primary health care and education, through economic re-organization in the interests of the poor, and through women gaining more control over their lives that birth rates will decline. It is factors such as these that are credited with bringing down birth rates in countries such as Cuba, Costa Rica, Sri Lanka and Kerala State in India. When parents have the security and the resources to raise, nurture and protect their families, birth rates begin to decline.

Despite this knowledge, there has been a massive disinvestment in human services throughout the Third World as a result of the debt crisis and the adjustment programs promoted by international institutions. During the late 1980's, UNICEF estimated that health and educational spending declined by 50 per cent and 25 per cent respectively in the world's thirty-seven poorest countries. The human cost of this disinvestment has been catastrophic. UNICEF calculated that an additional 650,000 children died in 1989 alone due to the debt crisis.

Blaming the poor for global environmental degradation is as nonsensical as blaming them for their poverty. The lifestyles of peasant families in the Third World pose little threat to the environment. The birth of a Canadian child has far more environmental consequences than the birth of a Third World child - over a lifetime, a Canadian child will consume up to 300 times more non-renewable resources. Yet it is Third World children who will subsidize the consumption of Canadian children by transferring resources to the North. "Our wealth has always generated our poverty by nourishing the prosperity of others," Uruguayan Eduardo Galeano wrote in 1972.

A sustainable world will not be achieved through attempts to control the reproductive behaviour of Third World women. Nor will it be achieved through development strategies aimed at "modernization" which merely transform subsistence producers into the superfluous poor. Rather, a sustainable world can only be achieved through the modification of the North's

wasteful consumption of luxury goods and the creation of a more equitable international order.

"The problem of the world's poor", Douglas Lummis put it recently in *The Development Dictionary*, "...is the problem of the world's rich. This means that the solution...is not a massive change in the culture of poverty so as to place it on the path of development, but a massive change in the culture of superfluity...". Whether or not the North has the wisdom and courage to change, however, remains to be seen.