

Defusing the Baby Bomb

One of the longer lasting aspects of the Great Ecology Scare of the 1969–70 intellectual season (a craze which seems to have faded away since the orgiastic exercises of “Earth Day”), is the Population Hysteria. The Left has clasped to its collective bosom the idea that population growth is the root cause of our Environmental Crisis, and Zero Population Growth clubs have sprouted over the nation’s colleges. Young men and women solemnly take the pledge never to have more than two children and thereby cause population growth. What is far worse, the same people are just as convinced that no one *be allowed* to have more than her two-child quota. Hardly have we begun to be freed from the tyranny of the *outlawry* of birth control, when, lo and behold!, birth control is now to be made *compulsory*.¹

¹Particularly grotesque is the “free-market” variant of this slave measure proposed by the distinguished economist Kenneth Boulding. Boulding would maximize individual freedom within the Zero Population Growth framework by granting every woman (or is it wife?) two baby-rights, and then permit women to sell these baby-rights to one another. So that if one woman wished to have four kids she could do so, but only if two other women limited their number to one apiece, or one decided to go without. Which makes about as much “free market” sense as allowing a market in slaves.

There is no need to detail here the monstrous tyranny entailed by this fascistic proposal. We need only remark that it is curious that the same leftists who properly assert every woman's absolute right over her own body in denouncing abortion laws, are grossly inconsistent in not applying this very right to every woman's right to bear children. Hopefully, Justice [Arthur] Goldberg's remarkable landmark decision in the Connecticut birth-control case, striking down that law for invasion of the Ninth Amendment natural right of privacy, will suffice to block any compulsory birth control law.² Even at that time, the anti-populationists, while hailing the decision, grumbled that the bringing in of the Ninth Amendment might destroy their cherished goal of compulsory birth control.³

Apart from the question of compulsion, what of the Population Problem? Are we suffering from "too much" population? The first question to ask is simply: how much is "too much?" Why has it suddenly become imperative to freeze the U.S. population at its present level of approximately 200 million? Also, why stop at 200 million? Is this a divinely imposed figure? Why not press on to allowing only one kid per family, thereby soon cutting the population in half? Or allow only one kid per ten families? Or, indeed, go the whole way by arbitrarily killing every tenth, or every fifth, or whatever person?

In short, how much is too much? Before the European colonization, the North American continent supported less than one million Indians, and these at near-starvation levels. That continent now supports almost three hundred million people, at enormously greater and, what is more, growing affluence. It should be clear, then, that the "proper" population level must be relative to the capital equipment and the industrial development of the area. A land area that barely supported

²*Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965). Before this case, the Supreme Court, recognizing the enormous libertarian implications of the Ninth Amendment, had never dared to apply it. The Ninth Amendment reads: "The enumeration in the Constitution of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people." Thus, the Amendment flatly states that the people do retain other rights, and what are they? Anyone understanding the terminology of the time knows that this means natural rights, and among such is the now-proclaimed right to privacy. On the Ninth Amendment and its significance see Bennett B. Patterson, *The Forgotten Ninth Amendment* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955); "Discovering the Ninth Amendment," *Left and Right* (Autumn, 1965), pp. 8–12.

³See James D. Carroll, "The Forgotten Amendment," *The Nation* (September 6, 1965), pp. 8–12,

one million people five hundred years ago now very readily supports three hundred times that number.

The question: how much is too much, then, can only be answered in the context of the capital and the extent of the market enjoyed by the economic system. The only cogent criterion, which has been worked out by economists, and which is never mentioned by the Population Hysterics, is the concept of the “optimum population” point. Setting aside the unfortunate moralistic connotation of the term, that this is the morally proper or best population level, the optimum population concept focuses on the point that, given any particular level of capital and technology, as we increase the population hypothetically from zero, the economy’s total production per head will increase, will eventually level off, and finally decline. That population level which, for any given capital and technology, yields the maximum production per person — the highest standard of living per person — is the “optimum” level.

Take, for example, the present United States economy. Suppose that a natural disaster suddenly wipes out three-fourths of the U.S. population. It is obvious that total production per head will fall drastically, simply because an enormous amount of equipment and jobs will lie idle for lack of workers. On the other hand, if the population of the U.S. should magically triple tonight, obviously the total production per head would also fall, since the given equipment would hardly absorb, or suffice, for the additional labor force. Somewhere in between lies the optimum population point.

Empirically, it is impossible to say for certain where this population point lies, whether we are at present below or above it. But one thing is certain: the production per person has continued to increase steadily in the United States, despite all the shackling of the market economy and despite (or helped by?) the continuing population growth. As long as the standard of living continues to rise, we surely cannot be very much beyond the optimum population level, if at all, and we surely have little or nothing to worry about on the score of population. Furthermore, while the economy grows, while capital increases and technology improves, as they have continued to do, the optimum population level continues to increase, just as it has already increased from far below a million to about two hundred million. The Population Scare is just that: still another bogey designed to scare the American public into more statist dictation.

Furthermore, the rate of population growth is not simply an arbitrary given; it has always been highly responsive to social and economic conditions. Before the advent of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution, population was indeed an enormous problem; for population in the famous words of Malthus, kept “pressing on the means of subsistence.” Population growth is the spectre that haunts all frozen, caste, pre-industrial societies; for a caste system can assign the son of a carpenter to be a carpenter as well, but what is to be done with the second son? It was the specter of population growth, and not some sort of unusually barbaric streak in their character, that caused the Spartans to put their newborn babies out into the woods overnight; it was their form of “population control.”

But all this was changed with modern capitalism and the Industrial Revolution. For now a rapidly growing and developing economy at last replaced the frozen systems of status. The enormous growth of capital and production enabled a great growth of population, largely by slashing the death rate. But, as in every subsequent case of a growing standard of living, this cut in the death rate was soon followed by a cut in the birth rate by people who wanted to preserve their new-found improvement in living conditions. It is precisely the undeveloped nations of Asia, for example, who have not enjoyed the benefits of capitalist development, whose birth rate remains high, and who may be said to suffer from “overpopulation.” But, the United States and Europe, who have enjoyed rising living standards, have far lower birth rates; in short, people attune themselves to higher living standards, and then make sure they are preserved by voluntarily lowering their birth rates.

Again, then “over-population” is not an absolute, but strictly relative to the capital and technology of the land areas concerned. India is now “overpopulated” for much the same reason that the United States would also be overpopulated if we only had the capital equipment and the market development of a century ago to service our two hundred million population. All this is well illustrated by the case of Japan. Eager to develop and industrialize rapidly after World War II, Japan encouraged birth control among its public to cut down on its seeming “over-population.” Now, however, with the same meager land area and virtual absence of natural resources but with a flourishing industrial economy and a very rapid growth rate, Japan finds, on the contrary, that it is beginning to suffer from a labor shortage — that it cannot fill the jobs available. As a result, it is wisely beginning to drop its artificial encouragements to birth control.

That “over” or “under” population are strictly relative to time and place is also seen by the fact that by no means all underdeveloped areas are in any sense densely populated. Just as the Indians of North America were only “overpopulated” in relation to their capital and technology, so are most areas of Africa and South America — in contrast to Asia — quite sparsely populated, especially in relation to their natural resources. What they lack is capital — and capitalism; given that, they would require a far greater population than they have today.

As for the United States, its birth rate has, over the long run and in recent years, tended downward. In fact, during the 1930s the birth rate was so low in the United States and particularly in France, that cries arose of imminent “racial suicide.” What happened was that after World War II, the desire for roots among returning GI’s, along with a sudden upsurge (now gone) in pro-baby values in our culture, led to the famous “baby boom,” and to a consequent acceleration of population growth. But that baby boom is now over, and the U.S. birth rate began tending downwards in 1957. The rate of U.S. population growth in the decade of the sixties was only 14%, the second lowest decennial increase on record. By 1969, in fact, the average increase of the U.S. population was only 1 percent per year, less than half the world rate, and the American birth rate was the lowest ever recorded in this country.⁴ The United States, furthermore, remains lower in population density (average number of persons per square mile), than such relatively uncrowded countries as Britain, Mexico, or Switzerland.

Not only that, but within the United States, far from population growth filling all the open spaces, there is actually, as Professor Wrong points out, “more open space in the United States today than there was a generation ago, and ... much of it is actual or potential farmland in the middle of the country.”⁵ In the decade of the sixties fully one-third of all the counties in the U.S. actually lost population (Zero Population Growth fulfilled with a vengeance!), most of them in the South and Middle West. In fact, since 1966, the central cities of the United States have been steadily losing population as well.

Under steadily growing capitalism, then, the Population Scare is a bogey from two directions: the optimum population point tends to

⁴See Dennis H. Wrong, “Portrait of a Decade,” *New York Sunday Times Magazine* (August 2, 1970), pp. 22ff.

⁵Ibid., p. 27.

increase continually; and the birth rate tends to level off naturally to preserve the higher living standards.

We have seen that the population problem is strictly relative to the economic conditions of a time and place; one country's or one era's "over-population" can easily become the opposite, and vice versa if economic growth is shackled or reversed. In fact, the Population Hysterics are, presumably unwittingly, trying desperately to create the very problem they are bellyaching about. For we have seen that population growth is no problem under growing and developing capitalism. But it does become a real problem when the economy is prevented from growing, when the progress under capitalism is replaced by frozen status. And since the anti-populationists are also opposed to economic growth in order to "save" scarce natural resources, this means that the Environmentalists, if they are allowed their way, will create the over-population menace which so far has been only a phantasm of their own making. Allow these opponents of progress their head, and we too can become another Sparta.

If the population question is relative to capital and technology, it is also relative to something else that is very important but that "nice" people don't like to talk about: the quality of the population. In short, if we deal only with quantities, with the numbers of people in different age groups, etc., we are in danger of forgetting that one person is not equivalent to another. A country or a region can be "over-populated" if the citizenry are lacking the qualities of hard work, thrift, and entrepreneurial foresight; let people enter the country with these very qualities, and both they and the original citizens will benefit. Even given existing capital, then, the country would not be "over-populated" with respect to these more productive and more entrepreneurial groups. In fact, few countries at few times are anything but short of such highly productive citizens.

To illustrate the importance of population quality, consider the Chinese — in general a highly productive and entrepreneurial group. They have migrated to other "over-populated" parts of Asia, coming, it should be noted, with little or no capital, and just as poor — if not more so — than the indigenous population. And yet, within a few years, these Chinese will have risen, become wealthy, created jobs and prosperity for themselves and much of the native population. The same is true of Lebanese who migrated to the "overpopulated" West Indies.⁶

⁶Thus, the leading economist of "underdeveloped" countries writes:

While we have used the concept of optimum population to explode the Population Bomb, we must recognize that even this concept makes too many concessions to the anti-populationists. First, because of its neglect of the differences in population quality; and second, because of the implicit assumption that the “optimum” is the morally correct. But people obviously have children because they want to and enjoy having them, and therefore people may well decide to accept a lower than optimum production per man in order to benefit from the enjoyment of having more children. A family might have four children instead of two, even though it knows that it will have a lower standard of living per member of the family. And surely that decision, that choice between the competing benefits of having more or less children, at lower or higher standards of living, is strictly up to each person, to each family to make. Their own free choice is the moral “optimum,” and not the imposed ethical standard of some outside observer.

There is something else of importance that we may say about the anti-populationists. It may seem extreme to say this, but they are not simply anti-population, they are also anti-people. Libertarians and opponents of the welfare state are accustomed to being denounced as “inhumane”; but it is the Environmentalists who are profoundly and deeply anti-human. Consider their basic social philosophy. Before the advent of man, they assert, everything was marvelous. Nature was in perfect harmony with itself, and each species of life lived in harmonious ecological balance with each other. They had to, since each species was passively determined by

“The Chinese in Malaya, the Indians in East Africa, and Lebanese in West Africa — usually migrants without capital and without much formal education — have quite soon greatly surpassed the economic performance of the indigenous population. ... These differences in economic quality and performance are also relevant to overpopulation and population pressure. There is heavy emigration from the West Indies, which are said to be severely overpopulated. Yet the Lebanese are anxious to migrate to the West Indies, and those few who are admitted generally prosper and accumulate capital. Thus even at current levels of technique the West Indies are not overpopulated in terms of Lebanese although they are in terms of West Indians.” Peter T. Bauer, *Economic Analysis and Policy in Underdeveloped Countries* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1957), pp. 74–76. On the crippling effects of immigration restrictions on Lebanese in West Africa, see P.T. Bauer and B.S. Yamey, “Economic Aspects of Immigration Policy in Nigeria and the Gold Coast,” *South African Journal of Economics* (1954), 223–232.

its given environment, by the “nature” in which it found himself. Then, in the midst of this perfect harmonious idyll, there came the great disturber, the great pain-in-the-neck: man. Man, by his nature, is not passively determined by his environment; and so man began to survive and flourish by transforming his environment, by changing things, by “conquering nature” instead of being determined by its “rhythms.” While the rest of nature is determined and “circular,” man persists in being purposeful and “linear,” endlessly changing his environment to improve his lot. The basic aim of the Environmentalists is to eradicate this purposefulness of man, to shackle his linearity and purpose, to reduce him to the primitive, animal status of a species “in harmony with nature” instead of its master. But this means, in essence, that the Environmentalists are bent upon eradicating man’s humanity, and therefore on destroying the human race itself. Jack Bulloff, professor of the history of science at SUNY, Albany, does not exaggerate when he writes:

The first idea [of the Environmentalists] holds that the natural environment is benign. To leave it alone, or restore it, would solve all environmental problems. But the record of two billion years is directly contrary to this. Paleontology is a record of the dead. ... Nature is inevitably lethal. ...

Certainly man pollutes. But he cannot survive otherwise. Man saved himself and advanced from animal to civilized being only by overcoming the lethal natural environment. By imposing social evolution on biological evolution man created an environment far more suited to human life than the mythical bliss of pre-social man. ...

It is strange that [the Environmentalists] ... should hunger for the unsafe, unenlightened, unaesthetic life of the savage. The idea that a world safe for rhinoceroses — or cobras or doddoes — is best for man appeals only in its innocences. Its proponents are really advocating genocide.⁷

Is there nothing we can do, then, about the Population Problem? Are there no measures that we can advocate? On the contrary, there are several

⁷Jack Bulloff, “A World Safe for Rhinos Is Not Best for Men,” *University Review* (State University of New York), Summer 1970.

things we can do, none of which, oddly enough, I have ever seen propounded by our Population Hysterics. We can return to (or rather, advance toward) laissez-faire by removing the host of government subsidies to population growth. We can remove the myriad governmental incentives for having more children. For example, we can stop levying higher income taxes on bachelors or on childless couples than on couples with children. The income tax system now subsidizes large families by levying taxes in inverse proportion to the number of children. We can also end the policy of the welfare system in paying welfare mothers per child, once again subsidizing larger and larger families, this time among mothers who can least afford to raise them. And finally, we can end the free public school system, which taxes bachelors and childless couples for the benefit of families with children and the more numerous the children the greater the subsidy. When families will have to pay for their own education, then this artificial and coerced subsidy to large families will be removed. Let us think in terms of achieving freedom by removing subsidies to larger families, rather than agitate to impose a coercive despotism on us all in behalf of a Population Myth that reflects a deep-seated hostility to the human race itself.