Social Implications of Population Control

The cost of modern technology and of a high material standard of living confronts us with increasing insistence. Jean Mayer has rightly observed that it is the affluent, far more than the poor, who pollute and destroy our environment. We are discovering that we cannot maintain our present standard of living for middle and upper-income Americans, let alone improve it for lower-income Americans, if our population continues to expand. Increasingly we are having to think of how to limit population growth and how to achieve a steady state in which population size is kept in balance with the condition of our environment, our resources, and an acceptable standard of living.

Until very recently, public discussion of population control has concentrated largely on contraception and on the religious issues we have chosen to attach to it. We have recognized that even if contraceptive devices were made readily available, people will use them only if they feel a need to do so. But we have paid relatively little attention to the conditions that promote the necessary sense of need. For long, concern was more with economically under-developed countries than with our own, and we tended to assume that in those countries increasing dependence on a money economy will somehow make having many children less an asset and more a liability. Serious discussion concentrated on monetary and other economic incentives in a context of community development. The problem remains as to what kinds of incentives will lead people in affluent, industrial societies to limit the number of their children.

Many societies in the past have faced the need to curtail population growth. They have met this need not only with economic incentives but with customs and values that have provided other incentives as well. Examining these societies can be rewarding, not because they are models to be imitated, but because they reveal the kinds of customs that tend to develop naturally, in the absence of rational planning, and the human costs that go with them. These societies have been essentially agrarian, with subsistence-oriented economies. For them the problem of overpopulation was tied closely to availability of subsistence resources, especially land.

In rural England in the thirteenth century, for example, a man without farm land was ineligible to marry, for he had no way to support children. As long as he remained single, he had a place in the home of his older brother, who had inherited the family farm and for whom he worked as an extra hand. But he lost a claim to livelihood from the family farm if he married. His only alternative was to emigrate to the growing towns or to the colonies or to take service on the estates of a local lord. Monogamy was coupled with the idea that only a married woman was eligible to bear children. Many women were unable to find husbands from among the limited ranks of men with farm land. They too remained on the family farm as unmarried dependents or sought their fortunes in the town or in domestic service on the estates of the nobility. Legitimacy laws rendered the children of unmarried women without legal rights to a livelihood at all. Indeed, a punitive stance against illegitimate children and their mothers provided incentives for single and hence ineligible women not to have children.

The people of Onotoa in the Pacific Ocean's Gilbert Islands developed customs along similar lines, according to information I obtained there in 1951. There, a family holding consists of a number of small plots of land. The eldest son gets a plot set aside for him, and the remaining plots are divided equally among all the sons, except that if there are daughters, one plot is given to the eldest as her dowry, if at all possible. Younger daughters get a plot only if there is a good deal of land available or if there are no sons. A man with very little land is not looked on with favor as a potential son-in-law. Because land is divided among the sons, married couples must calculate how many sons they can adequately provide for from their holdings, and the wife is encouraged to abort subsequent pregnancies after the quota has
brought in. Most younger sisters fall in the category of women who have no land. These women are ordinarily ineligible to be women's, therefore they may be concubines. Girls with land are chaperoned. They are expected to be virgin at marriage, to bear their husband’s children, and to help care for the children of the community. Landless girls are unchaperoned and allowed sexual freedom. In Western cultures, their older sisters marry, join the households of their brothers-in-law, where they assist their older sisters in return for food and clothing. A brother-in-law, who has sexual access to his wife’s landless younger sisters and, in return for land, could give them food and clothing to her father’s brothers and cousins. The Church has succeeded in modifying this practice, so that landless women are now free from sexual liaisons with men of their own choosing. But without the consent of these men, they cannot bear children. They resort to abortion and to the use of means of birth control available to them. If such a woman bears a child, it is legitimized if the father publicly acknowledges it. It has become the custom among some of the fathers to treat the child as any other son or daughter by him. Otherwise, the child is illegitimate and without rights in society.

Both the English and the Onotoa examples illustrate emphasis on eligibility to marry, eligibility to bear children, and exclusion of illegitimate children from society (however illegitimacy is locally defined). In each case, the responsibility for ensuring that a child is born directly by women. Onotoa accord Downerless women sexual freedom and, more importantly, a social freedom of choice as they wish to sex, despite a kind of compen- sation. If they refer to them by the unflattering designation “ladies of a generation,” they do not mean to it is a time for women to come to their own. They bear a child, she, a woman’s life is completely altered. Care of the child is primarily her responsibility. She will not be able to marry or leave her child to anyone else. If the child is born, it is born; the mother will have to support it. The whole of her life will be spent on taking care of the child and looking for work or finding another place to live. In the meantime, the woman’s life is still the same. It is all too likely to be so in a society that stresses eligibility to bear children and legitimacy of birth as a test of whether to people to practice birth control (whatever the mechanical means of birth control may be).

Some areas of rural Ireland offer something of a contrast. Eligibility to marry must wait until the family farm is turned over to the family farm. Until they marry and take over property, men are regarded as “boys,” and not yet fully responsible adult. Marriage helps in marriage helps guarantees having few children in wadloch. Having them out of wedlock is inhibited by emphasis on sexual contin- guideline. Reintroducing this emphasis in a social attitude, encouraged by the Church, that makes sex fraught with anxiety for men as well as for women. The priest as a compulsory outlet for men and fighting provides an alternative to sex for demonstrating manliness. In the absence of organized birth control, wives have to encourage their husbands to frequent the pub evenings. If they have too much to drink, they won’t be able to perform sexually and their wives can avoid unwanted pregnancies. Here the responsibility for population control is not so clear, because the option for an illegitimate child is effectively led to delay motherhood for so long a period in their lives.

By accomplishing this without direct reference to resources for livelihood or emphasis on legit- imacy and punishment against illegitimate children, Yap is more immediately relevant to our own situation in the United States. I do not imply that we should seek to follow Yap; rather, I find Yap helps to put some that are happening in the United States today into interesting perspective.

Our own double standard of morality has stressed sexual continence for women, except in marriage, and has given rewards to women for bearing children. Rewards have rewarded women primarily in their role as mothers. Such emphasis has provided incentives for women to hold off on reproduction as early as possible and to start having children as early as possible. It effectively promotes population growth, badly needed in a society dedicated to industrial development and economic growth. Now, significantly, we see this morality and this system of rewards changing. Increasingly there is a shift toward perinatal sexual freedom and a later age of marriage for women. Of even greater potential impact is the development of the Women’s Liberation Movement, which objectives include things that can serve to inhibit population growth. In calling for more and equal opportunities for women and equal pay for equal work, it calls for the development of rewards for women in other than the mother role. As other women become eligible to stand in front of courts and as the great sources of reward for women, they will be less eager to cut themselves off from them by having children. They will be more willing to support the children they have and to time the births of their children so as to be able to enjoy these other rewards. In calling for liberal abortion laws, the Women’s Liberation Movement is also stressing the right not to be a mother. Thus, it is stressed in the development of institutional arrangements that will lead women to want to have fewer children and will make it easy for them to avoid having children they don’t want.

The emphasis on the application of empha- sizing rewards that compete with the rewards of motherhood, rather than emphasizing eligibility and legitimacy and punishment for illegitimate and egalitarian values. But we must also recognize the presence of traditions and values in our society that, under circumstances of severe population pressure, would work toward the institution of a criteria of eligibility. Ownership of land is not a ready test of eligibility to marry and have children in our industrial and urban society, but having an acceptable source of livelihood is a ready test of eligibility to marry and have children. Perhaps we should see the world as a serious shortage of jobs, for example, there may be increased emphasis on eligibility for jobs that are suitably employed before he is eligible to marry and with this, this.

increased tendency to penalize women who have children out of wedlock and to treat illegitimate children with great disdain.

How everything will work out remains to be seen. If, as we believe, we shall become increasingly concerned with growing population, and if, for this reason, it is necessary to our future survival, we shall perform the significant role of either or both the two aspects. The first is to emphasize the stressing of eligibility rewards for women that are incompatible with the demands of motherhood or a role that emphasizes eligibility. The second is to make this period of life that provides strong incentives to honor the eligibility rules. Whichever direction we take will require considerable adjustment, if not altering, of traditional values and of our present mode of life.

By implication, of course, this discussion of what some of these adjustments will be. They reveal that there are costs to population control regardless of the institutions that have been accomplished. These costs involve economic and societal adjustments as well as adjustments in ideology and values.

I am not competent to project what these adjustments might involve. But questions occur to me that I feel deserve our attention.

For one thing, our national economy and its supporting institutions and values are largely based on the idea of growth. This idea has been called into question here and there in the past few years, but I think it is safe to say that most of us have come to realize that the idea of growth is in need of a radical rethinking. We have been concerned with how we can get more and better for everyone. That this might not lead to Utopia after all was largely left to the future, except as they portrayed our own for our own, could be dismissed as fantasy. Most of us, in the spirit of the present effort, are worried about what might happen to some extent economic development is economic growth. Does the idea of economic growth need an expanding market? Have the industrial nations not been concerned with colonialism in the past? Or are market and international cooperation in the face of a world where a country becomes a potential consumer? Do the United Nations or the World Bank or any other organization really need an expanding market? And have not been concerned with the economic development of underdeveloped nations more recently? Is the idea of economic growth a reason? Does not an expanding market, mean either an increasingly affluent body of consumers or a numerically increasing body of consumers? A raising of the ceiling that goes lower than does not mean a raise in what we grow? Is this ceiling precisely why we are increasingly concerned today with population control?

Pretending there will be no greatly expanding market in a demographic steady state, at least not for very long, it seems to me that a steady state population implies a steady-state economy.
It seems to me that thinking in steady-state terms about our economy requires a tremendous shift in our present habits of thought about our economic future and about what we shall regard as meaningful goals for our society and for ourselves as individuals.

In economically stratified societies like ours, an expanding economy creates increasing numbers of job opportunities at the higher levels of the salary and prestige ladder. It also needs an expanding supply of people willing to fill the increasing number of jobs at whatever levels of skills are needed at the bottom of the ladder. Whether by internal population growth or by open-door immigration policies, an expanding economy needs an expanding population, for which it keeps creating expanding economic opportunities. When an economy ceases to expand, job opportunities and job mobility are reduced. The report of a longitudinal study in Serbia is significant in this regard. There, during periods of economic growth, when the supply of labor was short, recruitment into jobs crept down the social hierarchy, and many people moved upward into higher level jobs than their parents had held. In times of economic stagnation or retreatment, recruitment from below decreased markedly. Sons tended to have the same kinds of jobs as their fathers, and under periods of severe retreatment, the sons of people higher in the social hierarchy bumped people lower down from less prestigious jobs. The report traced this process through alternating periods of stagnation, growth, depression, and subsequent growth in the first half of this century, finding a significant correlation between occupational mobility and indices of economic growth.

Ours, too, is a class-ordered society, whose Horatio Alger myth of economic and social mobility has been given some substance in an era of economic growth. In an economically steady state, we can expect a stronger tendency for people to recruit their own children and the children of their kinsmen and friends to succeed them in their jobs or to join them in their professions and trades. Some craft unions already recruit largely in this manner, and the medical profession has exhibited a tendency in the same direction. The end of the line of such tendencies is exemplified by the caste structure of traditional Hindu India and by the system of hereditary social estates in medieval Europe. Indeed, historic caste and caste-like systems in India, the Middle East, and Europe appear to have emerged after periods of growth that had produced complex economic and political systems, with many occupational and governmental roles and specialties, and had then been followed by periods when growth largely stopped. It should be clear, then, that if we find it necessary in the future to achieve a balance between environment, population size and standard of living—a balance that allows for adjustment and change but that essentially precludes radical population or economic growth—such balance will entail economic, social and cultural adjustments on a large scale. So profound, indeed, are the implications of population control that they are likely to generate strong counter pressures against efforts at such control and against the institutional adjustments it would set in motion. How everything will work out is much more likely to be determined by the way competing interests within our society decide matters in the arena of power politics than by any rational process.

We like to think of ourselves, of course, as dealing with social problems rationally; but the rational procedures that achieve desired social ends at minimum cost are rarely palatable. To see what a rational population policy could involve, consider the Polynesian Island of Tikopia.

On Tikopia, every household had its place through its male head in a hierarchy of hereditary social ranks. The eldest sons of the eldest sons of the eldest sons, going back to the founding ancestors, were the high chiefs; while the youngest sons of the youngest sons were the lowest in rank. Raymond Firth (1959) tells what he found there in 1950 shortly after a devastating typhoon had destroyed much of the island's food supply. The chiefs were performing their traditional role of taking inventory of the remaining food supply and estimating how long it would be before new crops could be brought to harvest. They would then, in accordance with their traditional right, determine the number of people that available food would support for the determined period of time. Having done so, they would then start with the highest ranking households and count down through the next highest ranking households and so on until they had reached the designated number. All households of lower rank than that would then be required to go to sea, never to return. Few of them could hope to survive to find a landfall elsewhere. Colonial government relief from the Solomon Islands made such measures unnecessary, as it turned out; but Firth found the low ranking families in dread of what might be required of them. Yet they accepted that all would starve if some did not leave, and they did not challenge the right of the chiefs to order them into exile. We find such customs horrible to contemplate, but we must think seriously of the even more horrible alternatives.

We in the United States do not have to face the population control problems confronting the people of Tikopia on their tiny, isolated island—at least in nothing approaching so acute a form. The moral remains, however, that rational control procedures involve the deliberate making of decisions that affect human life and opportunity in life. They require curtailment in some way precisely what our social and political ethic says every man should be free to enjoy: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. All signs indicate that we are going to feel increasing pressure to control our population size. However we manage it, if we manage it at all, a steady state will not be easily achieved and will be gained only at the cost of some of the things we now hold very dear. •

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