Population as Politics *A Review Article*

DOROTHY STEIN

Institute for Historical Research, London

Jason L. Finkle and C. Alison McIntosh, eds. *The New Politics of Population: Conflict and Consensus in Family Planning.* New York: The Population Council, 1994.

G. Narayana and John F. Kantner, *Doing the Needful.* Boulder: Westview Press, 1992.

Virginia Abernethy, *Population Politics: The Choices That Shape Our Future.* New York: Plenum Press, 1993.

Lindsey Grant, ed., *Elephants in the Volkswagen: Facing the Tough Questions About Our Overcrowded Country.* New York: W. H. Freeman, 1992.

The attitudes of governments toward the natural increase of the numbers they govern used to be both simple and positive. They considered the size and growth of their populations a measure of national power and economic strength. National populations that spontaneously slowed their increase, such as the French, did so against government policy or, more recently, under governments claiming no official policy (behind which a variety of economic and social interest groups jockeyed against each other). This has been the case for almost all the industrialized countries of the world (except Japan), whose rates of natural increase are now approaching replacement levels or less.

The conventional wisdom on the subject of population trends is that of the "demographic transition," which held that economic development and industrialization in the poorer parts of the world—those which during this century have shown accelerated rates of natural increase—would eventually lead to the adoption of small family preferences and the use of contraception to achieve this end. In other words, underdeveloped countries would follow the path to the lower fertility of the industrialized nations that in the last century and early part of this one also experienced unprecedented rates of natural increase.

Earlier books on population that challenged this wisdom pointed to the dangers posed by rising and increasingly wasteful consumption as well as high densities and rapidly increasing numbers of human beings. They were written by environmentalists who stressed the long-term local and global effects upon resources, space, the generation of pollution, and the unsustainability of continued growth. Nevertheless, when state-sponsored policies to restrain fertility have been adopted, no government has so far felt capable of taking such a farsighted view; instead, only the envisaged short-term econom-

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ic effects were cited; hence the debates tended to concentrate on outcomes limited both as to locality and time. Does rapid population growth help or hinder local or national development? Is breeding or importing cheap labor economically desirable? Can a growing number of the dependent elderly be supported without a constantly replenished supply of youthful earners?

The books considered here form a kind of second generation, more forthrightly political, and falling on either side of the development divide. Two of them examine the political processes and actors that influence the shape and implementation of birth control policies in the third world. The other two, while seemingly cast in the environmentalist mould, by focusing on the purported national interest of the developed world (in particular, the United States) are themselves highly political: They are blueprints for policy. In all cases, the openly political perspective is helpful in understanding why the same positions continue to be asserted long after they have lost whatever initial validity they possessed and why the same observations can often be used as weapons on both sides of many a population debate.

A useful and informative beginning is provided by *The New Politics of Population,* a set of essays which include an overview of many of the issues and actors involved in the changing policies of governments in all the underdeveloped geographic regions of the world, as well as the roles and activities of the national and international agencies charged with implementing the policies. There are several case studies of population policy in some of the most important regions (India, China, Africa, and Latin America), in addition to analyses of the roles of transnational agents, such as women's groups, the Catholic and Islamic religions, and antiabortion activists. For example, Barbara Crane's study of the latter notes that the publicity given to the abortion struggle in Western countries has had the effect of making access to safe abortion more difficult in the developing world, where 90 percent of maternal deaths from septic abortions occur.

What is at least as interesting as what is included in these essays, however, is what is left out: immigration (the domestic population policy of the wealthy countries), environmental concerns, the political left, the feminist critique of the ethics of contraceptive development and administration, and children's rights. Another limitation, which was inevitable, is that the volume grew out of a conference held in 1990; and the rapid demographic and political developments which have taken place in some areas since then have inevitably resulted in several of the essays being outdated at the time of publication.

The book begins with a couple of rather mind-numbing essays on trends in population policy since the 1960s, which have generally been from complacency or pronatality to viewing third-world birth rates as too high. But, in a few cases, the change has been in the opposite direction, and policies in this area can change with bewildering rapidity. This generalization is exemplified by Gustavo Cabrera's tracing of demographic attitudes in Mexico, which for

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the first 150 years after independence, were very pronatal. In 1824 there were 6 million Mexicans, and the government worried about filling and developing its vast territory. The United States relieved it of part of this anxiety by annexing about 40 percent of its area in 1846. Nevertheless, the Mexican constitution and immigration policies were influenced by its northern neighbor. Like the United States, Mexico excluded the sick and undesirable and favored migrants from western and central Europe and Japan: All other countries put together had quotas only one-tenth as large. Mostly by natural increase, by 1970, there were 50 million inhabitants. At that point, government population policy went into reverse; and the total fertility rate went from 6.3 in 1973 to 3.7 in 1987.

In addition to state policy, one factor that runs like a thread through many of the essays is the competition among many ethnic and religious sub-groups, many of these exacerbated by previous colonialist policies. Thus, Omari Kokole, in "The Politics of Fertility in Africa," points out that the arbitrary divisions of territory made by colonial conquerors for their own purposes have persisted since independence. In addition, decisions made by colonial rulers about which groups were appropriate for administrative and which for military occupations, which were to be educated and which not, have all fed into "ethnic competition," such as that in Rwanda, in which cultural differences are exaggerated in conflicts over land, jobs, and economic and political power.

Turning to research in family planning, Donald Warwick claims that it has been more instrumental than scientifically objective. It has been used by funding agencies, public and private, as a kind of wedge to introduce knowledge about contraception and eventually programs themselves into countries and areas where the agencies have already decided they are needed. Consequently, agencies fund researchers who are already enthusiasts for population control; and this bias influences their findings, most notably in assessments of "unmet need" for birth control. Scientists and authors who have contrary points of view are given short shrift.

Although Warwick has a point in doubting the validity of studies aimed at gauging ideal family size among people who have never considered the matter before, his own bias soon becomes all too clear, especially in his view that enthusiasts for unlimited population growth argue their cases with equal or greater scientific backup. What makes his criticism even less convincing than his accounts of (unsuccessful) attempts to deny him publication is his citing of a famous case in which a children's vaccination program in Latin America was misunderstood as an attempt to sterilize the children when opponents found a phial of vaccine marked STERILE. This, says Warwick, is an example of the use of research to polarize communities; but of course, it was not research at all.

Also in the area of implementation rather than research is his observation that the opponents of family planning programs have been successful in

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making the terms population control, goals, and targets all taboo. But it remained for the volume's editors, in a separate essay, to ask, in a footnote, just how planning can proceed without any kind of estimate of future demand and, in another, to point out that linguistic engineering in the contraceptive field was already in full swing when Margaret Sanger changed "birth control" to "family planning," while abortion has lurked for millennia under the cover of "menstrual regulation."

Largely missing from Warwick's analysis and the volume as a whole is another area in which the politics of research is increasingly played out: that of the ways in which new techniques are developed, tested, introduced, and administered. This includes the range of contraceptives on offer, the ethics of informed consent to research trials, and the followup and treatment of complaints and side effects. Here feminist groups have been vehement in criticizing every aspect. The gender dimension, which is assuming increasing importance in population plans, also brings with it an awareness that politics happens not only on the international and national stage but in subnational groupings, such as the ethnic and religious communities which are usually represented by men, and, above all, within the family.

The essay by Ruth Dixon-Mueller and Adrienne Germain, "Transnational Actors and Family Planning Policy: Population Policy and Feminist Political Action in Three Developing Countries," deals not with these matters, however, but shows instead that, despite all the recent attention to women at the Cairo conference, women's groups in traditional societies still have great difficulty in uniting around the issues of reproductive rights, especially those of access to contraception and abortion. Women themselves are riven by divisions over such matters as arranged marriage, female genital mutilation, and sex education for unmarried girls, as well as abortion. In Muslim Nigeria, women's groups have found it more tactful to approach such matters as attempts to prevent the social and emotional traumas of infertility and subfecundity; while in Christian-dominated Brazil and the Philippines, feminist groups have been forced into uneasy alliances with government and other male-dominated agencies.

The sad tale of the difficulties faced by women's groups in securing rights and access to contraception scarcely permits Dixon-Mueller and Germain to consider the debates taking place among feminist groups in both North and South who maintain that no consideration, whether of health or welfare or economics or national development, should override an individual woman's power to decide, on whatever grounds, when and how many children to have. In *Doing the Needful,* such feminist criticism is cited only as a minor hurdle to be overcome in the authors' dissection of India's population policy, its rationale and implementation, placed within its social, political, and historical context.

After agreeing that India's problem of population growth is second to none,

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Narayana and Kantner find everything about attempts at solution wrong, starting with the economic and political models of development. Gandhi's vision of village republics was romantic and doomed from the start, while attempts at socialism have produced only "distortions." Despite (or because of) measures to accommodate a bewilderingly plural society while favoring the traditionally downtrodden, the central government is viewed with general distrust and seen as corrupt and incompetent.

This distrust is an important reason for the failure of the central government's birth control programs, which are largely nationally set and funded. But there are many other reasons, including overreliance on terminal rather than temporary methods; the bad name given to vasectomy during the state of emergency declared in 1975; untrained health workers; and, although this factor is muted by the authors, the tendency for castes and religious groupings, as well as classes and even geographic localities to vote as blocs in the struggle for political power and economic advantage. Given the authors' general economic and political outlook, it is not surprising that they look to the private sector and to public and private partnerships in such matters as the social marketing of contraceptives for more sensitive, acceptable, and in the end more successful family planning programs.

The first country in the world to adopt a policy to limit its population, India since 1952 has undergone monitoring and received study and assistance from a large number of international agencies, organizations, and foreign governments, in stark contrast to China's isolation. Yet the Indian government recently admitted that, despite the estimated averting of 143 million births, the past forty years of family planning have failed to reduce the average annual population growth below 2 percent and that less than 45 percent of the country's fertile couples practice contraception. Yet there is hope: Surveys show that the proportion of Indian couples who say they want no more children (perhaps a more meaningful statement than ideal family size) has remained at 50 percent, while contraceptive use has doubled and fertility rates decreased by one-third.

Despite its rather narrow social and economic outlook, *Doing the Needful* makes a number of points of wider application, which are becoming more and more salient in other parts of the world as well. The most notable, public health measure that have lowered infant and child mortality in even the poorest countries, have shown that increasing the number of surviving children is actually more effective than bribes or incentives in introducing the notion that a desirable and modest family size may be imagined and actually realized by people who never before had that luxury.

Not so, according to Virginia Abernethy in *Population Politics.* Abernethy challenges the belief that "development is the best contraceptive" by pointing to a number of instances in which a rise in standard of living has not immediately been followed by a drop in birth rates. Too impatient to realize that she was looking at only the first stage of a demographic transition now proceeding

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in many parts of the world more rapidly than the original one and that even the cases she used in point have since been followed by reduced fertility levels, she concludes that foreign aid has been wasted to the extent that it relieved misery and poverty, claiming that it would be best leave the rest of the world to stew in their own misery until they come to their economic senses and help themselves.

Both *Population Politics* and *Elephants in the Volkswagen* take a hard look at the growing numbers in the underdeveloped world and decide to do something about preserving the American Way of Life. Though the titles of both speak of choices and difficult decisions, the arguments contained are as untroubled by uncertainty as they are by considerations of historical injustice, women's rights, children's welfare, the complexities of human motivation or social organization, or anything other than a tight view of national self-interest.

Only Paul and Anne Ehrlich (in *Elephants*) are less than complacent in pointing out that the United States is, from an environmental point of view, the most overpopulated country in the world. For the most part, the role of advanced technology in this volume is turned on its head and looked at rather for its ability to produce efficient and clean uses of natural resources, with only an occasional note of warning that market-oriented human profligacy can manage to eat up any gains made in this way.

Not surprisingly, both books take the view that the United Stats has been either insanely generous or careless in its immigrations policies and that immigration must cease forthwith (except in the case of the technically oriented *Elephants,* which proposes that cunningly selected brains should be drained from foreign sources as needed). Abernethy mentions that Mexicans in California have higher birth rates than in Mexico, and Lindsey Grant asserts that "if a Peruvian migrates to the United States, he will pollute more than he did in Peru. We may be sure that one of the first things he will buy, to get to work, is a big old cheap automobile, belching smoke" (p. 16). Neither book recognizes the increasing globalization of the economy or its implications for the use of cheap labor *in situ,* rather than by importing it. Completely absent as well from both are such matters as the history of American incursions on Mexican territory or the politics of American encouragement of immigration from Vietnam, China, and Cuba.

Lindsey Grant, in a section on rebuttals, does perform a service in taking on several of the standard arguments for complacency or pronatalism in population policy. In addition to confronting the rather mystical faith of some pronatalists in technological innovation, in which crowding is believed to concentrate minds as well as bodies, Grant also takes on the argument that an increasing number of the old must be sustained by balancing it with a supply of the employed young. He points out that, aside from balancing the dependency of the young and that of the unemployed (increasingly caused by

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technology), more labor could be supplied, if a real need existed, in a number of other ways, such as reducing unemployment, including taking up the remaining slack in women's employment, and, refreshingly, improving job safety.

Although both these books ground their prescriptions and fears on the foreseen inability of the planet, particularly that portion of the planet within the jealously guarded borders of the United States, to continue to support its present, let alone future population, there are clear differences of approach (and of course, in consistency of approach, since *Elephants* is a collection of essays, while Abernethy's is work by a single author). *Elephants* is concerned about the preservation of a comfortable lifestyle and concentrates on a more technically oriented analysis.

Abernethy is more socially oriented. She takes a quick and superficial tour around a number of cultures, but her heart really belongs to a very narrow economic determinism, even as she longs for a return to an earlier, more spartan as well as more socially controlled (and perhaps mythical) world of small prying communities. Furthermore, her ire does not stop at inveighing against selfish foreigners who want to partake of the good life and share it with their numerous progeny but is also directed against those at home of lower class, darker race or educational inadequacy, who not only reproduce at higher rates than native Americans on high incomes but seem to want high-paying jobs as well.

In their haste to urge drastic solutions, the authors of both books never paused to notice that birth rates around the world are on the way down, an indication there is something wrong with the Malthusian notion that people, women in particular, unless punished severely enough, will bear as many children as they possibly can. This does not, of course, absolve wealthy and technologically advanced countries with low birthrates from recognizing that they each have a historical and continuing role in creating environmental degradation and that they should try to do something about it other than pulling up the ladder behind them.

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