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The Family Planning Controversy

DISCUSSIONS about population growth and family planning have played an important role in recent years, not only in scientific journals but also in popular magazines and daily newspapers. In these articles population growth—and in specific the rapid growth now prevailing in the so-called developing countries—is often described as a dreadful menace to the future of mankind. To attain a limited number of births is described as a measure which should be given top priority. Neo-malthusianist arguments of this kind are not the least frequent during 1974, by the United Nations designated as the World Population Year.

This article tries to examine in a critical way the more common arguments used in favor of family planning. It will also present the arguments which in my view are relevant for a non-Malthusian approach to contemporary population problems.

My remarks will start with one of the most popular arguments, namely that:

"The size of the world population is (or is soon becoming) too large in relation to the size of the earth and to its limited resources",

The present world population is about 4 billion, and the estimated annual growth amounts to 70-80 million, perhaps even more. The annual rate of increase is consequently 2 percent, which gives a doubling period

of 35 years. A continued growth at the present rate would lead to a population of 8 billion in the year 2009, 16 billion in the year 2044 and so on.

In the long run a continued growth at a constant rate is out of question- nobody denies that. But is a reference to the world population, to the size of the earth and to its total resources really relevant ?

Expressions like "One world for all" (=the slogan for the 1974 World Population Conference) have a positive appeal. However, like the often used expression "spaceship earth" it conveys the false impression that all mankind is in the same boat and that we are cooperating. Idealistic thinking of this kind does not bring us anywhere; it rather makes us neglect the reality, which is that nearly all borders are closed to migrants. And who can maintain that exploitation of certain countries by others is a past stage in the history of mankind ? Also within one and the same country it is nearly everywhere relevant to make a distinction between exploited and exploiters.

If borders are closed to migrants, an "overpopulation problem" may arise sooner in some countries than in others. This brings us to the second popular statement, namely that;

"The developing countries are overpopulated."

. The term "overpopulation" may refer either to the *growth* or to the *size* of the population. Let us start with the first alternative.

Nearly all countries in the Third World at present have an annual increase rate exceeding 2 percent, and there are number of countries where the rate even exceeds 3 per cent. Such a rapid growth must of course at some stage lead to a large and dense population, but most countries in the Third World are still so sparsely populated that it will take some time, in many cases a long time, before this has occurred. In the industrialised part of the world, population growth is small or negligible, but some of these countries are very densely populated indeed.

If "overpopulation" refers to rapid growth, the consequence must be that many sparsely populated countries are considered "overpopulated", whereas many very densely populated countries are not. This would be

absurd. The concept overpopulation can only refer to the size or the density of the population, possibly to the size of the population in relation to food production or other resources.

In order to illustrate the present situation let us look at some data, giving the number of inhabitants per sq. km. for some countries, where the overall density is high (1972):

England and Wales	324	Bangladesh	425
Netherlands	319	India	164
Belgium	317	Vietnam, North	133
Japan	280	Philippines	123
Federal Rep. of Germany	240	Vietnam, South	105
Italy	178	Pakistan	67

With the exception of Bangladesh the best examples of densely populated countries can thus be found in Western Europe.

The overall density of the population is admittedly a poor measure. There are, no doubt, a number of cases where the overall density of the country is low, but where the population is concentrated in certain parts of the country and where the possibilities for an expansion in the rest of the country are limited. The Nile valley in Egypt is a good example.

If countries are considered one by one, we will find that there are a number of countries where the population already is so large that a further increase would lead to an improper overcrowding or to other inconveniences. In the developed parts of the world we may think of certain parts of western Europe and of the United States, as well as of Japan. In the Third World we may besides Bangladesh—consider West Bengal and Kerala in India, Java in Indonesia and a number of islands, such as Mauritius, Barbados, Singapore and Hong Kong as being already very crowded.

But there are many other countries which could take a population, considerably larger than the present one, yes, which would in fact benefit from a larger population¹. We may especially think of large parts of South America and Africa.

1. See Boserup, Ester, *The Conditions for Agricultural Growth*, London : Alien and Unwin 1965.

Could large scale migration from densely to sparsely populated countries then be recommended ? No, at least under present organisation of society extensive migration tends to create antagonism and class distinctions, and can only be recommended in exceptional cases.

The reason why the concept "overpopulation" is so popular is not difficult to find. The term serves to create the impression that the main reason why there is so much poverty and unemployment, why there are so large slum areas in too rapidly expanding towns, and why the economic development is so slow is because there are "too many people". In this way attention is diverted from the real causes of the backwardness in the countries of the Third World.

Already Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels criticized the concept overpopulation². Their main argument is that it is impossible to speak about any generally applicable "law of population". By this they meant Malthus' law according to which there will always be a tendency for the population to increase more rapidly than the means of subsistence. The relevant thing is that under capitalism there is capital accumulation (thanks to the surplus value derived from the work of the workers), and that this accumulation creates a relative overpopulation which becomes manifest in the form of unemployment. The conclusion is that it is the mode of production which must be changed. A less rapid population growth implies no remedy.

It is sometimes said that Marx and Engels would have held a different opinion, if they had known that population growth could become so rapid as it is today in the Third World. But Engels in a way did foresee this development. In a letter to Kautsky in 1881 he wrote :

"There is, of course, the abstract possibility that the number of people will become so great that limits will have to be set to their increase. But if at some stage communist society finds itself obliged to regulate the production of human beings,... it will be precisely

2. See for instance, Engels, Fr., *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy* (1844) and Marx, K... *Capital*, Vol. 1 (1967). Their arguments on population have been reproduced in Meek, R. L. (ed.) *Marx and Engels on the Population Bomb* (Sec. ed., Ramparts Press, Berkeley, Cal. 1971).

this society, and this society alone, which can carry this out without difficulty.³

But let us return to population growth and consider another popular argument, namely that;

"Rapid population growth (irrespective of whether the population is dense or sparse) makes it impossible to achieve satisfactory social and economic progress".

The following quotation from a UN pamphlet is typical:

"Indeed many developing nations may well see most of their resources—needed for improvement of present miserable living conditions—eaten up by continuing high rates of population growth, unless drastic action is taken both at the national and international level".⁴

This is in fact a variant of the old Malthusian argument, according to which there is a tendency for the population to increase more rapidly than the production of food and other commodities can do.

The argument is often made more specific in a number of ways. Thus, it is often maintained that a rapid growth of the population implies such a rapid expansion of the labor force, that it becomes impossible to prevent unemployment from rising. Another frequent argument says that rapid population growth worsens the dependency burden of the working population. It is further more often maintained that when there is rapid population growth only limited savings are possible and for this reason investment targets cannot be fulfilled.

Arguments of this kind imply that a too rapid population growth is given the blame for diseases of society. The false impression is created that a reduced population growth would lead to development. But there

3. Meek, loc. cit., p. 120.

4. Population : The multilateral approach, Pamphlet issued by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities in 1973. Another typical exponent of Malthusianist thinking is the Declaration on Food and Population, issued in 1974 by the US Population Crisis Committee and signed by a large number of persons.

is no experience, according to which a less rapid population growth as such will have any favorable effect.

Family planning advocates will reply that they don't mean that family planning alone will work wonders; the idea is that family planning in combination with social and economic planning will lead the "developing" countries in a favorable direction.

We may ask what social and economic planning ? The tragic fact is that the development which now takes place in most "developing" countries is slow and distorted. It is true that nearly everywhere some efforts are being made to extend the school system, to build roads and other communications, to increase food production and to organise industrial production, but a closer examination will disclose that a main effect of these efforts is increasing class differences. The improvements are absorbed by a small but rapidly expanding "elite", and the bulk of the population remains as poor as before, if not even poorer. There is every reason to believe that the same tendency of increasing class differences would prevail if the population growth were less rapid.

Some notes about the historical background to the present situation would seem relevant. During the 17th century Europeans made the discovery that it was possible to become rich and powerful through large scale exploitation of human manpower for the production of goods for a market. Sugar was the most important of these products and its production was made possible through the slave trade from Africa to the West Indies. Also at a later stage, during the early period of capitalist industrial development, big resources of manpower were a necessary prerequisite.

To-day the capitalist mode of production is not at all to the same extent depending upon manpower for the production of commodities. Profit can be derived through the use of machines. But human beings are required as consumers, and there is reason to believe that a too slow population growth makes it difficult for the capitalist system to function. This has been maintained by several bourgeois economists, e. g. by J. M. Keynes who meant that a too low number of births in the 1920's was the main reason for the Depression in the 1930's, a view which was strongly

supported by the American economist Alvin Hansen. There are also marxist arguments, explaining why in a capitalist economy a slower growth of the population (or rather of the labor force) leads to more not less unemployment.⁵

This argument does not exclude that if a country has given up the capitalist system and adopted a really efficient planning program for the all-round development of its economy and found means for the implementation of this program, there is reason to believe that a less rapid population increase might contribute to development. China may be quoted as an example. The Peoples Republic of China has launched a family planning program, which recently has achieved a remarkable success.⁶

"Industrially developed countries also have a population problem",

The main argument refers to environment, and the following quotation is typical:

"This opinion . . . insists that, despite their relatively small annual percentage increase, the richest nations account for an important part of the population problem because their resource-use and environmental impact per head is between 30 and 60 times that of the average south Asian peasant".⁷

The resource-use allocation between rich and poor countries and the environmental problem caused by modern industrial development, no doubt, deserve close attention and vigorous measures. But is there any reason to believe that a slower population growth or even a population decrease in the developed countries will contribute to a solution of these problems ? No, of course not.

Some data will clarify the situation better. In most developed countries the annual population growth is now below 1 per cent. The trend of the birth rate is nearly everywhere in the downward direction, and

5. Marx, K., Theories of Surplus Value, 11/2, cf. Sweezy, P. M., Theory of Capitalist Development, III/12/3, New York : Monthly Review Press 1942.

6. Chen, Pi-Chao, China's Population Program at the Grass Roots Level. Studies in Family Planning, August 1973.

7. Brian Johnson in People, Oct. 1973.

there are many countries where the growth is practically nil, or even negative (Western Germany). If we look at reproduction, we will find that there are many countries where the number of children born is less than what is required for the long run maintenance of the present population size.

As regards resource-use and environment damage we find, on the other hand, increase rates which are really rapid.

A reduced population growth may very well, at least in the short run, cause increased harm to environment, because families with children have less time and money to spare, which can be used for environmental damage. Here as in other connections it is not justified to argue "ceteris pari-bus". A small number of persons can cause much more damage to environment than a big number—it all depends on the kind of industry. To solve environmental problems will require a production system which is not based on the profit motive.⁸

The main reason why the above arguments about the desire for a reduced population growth in the developed countries turn up now is because representatives for developed countries in their contacts with countries of the Third World so often have heard that the family planning arguments are racist-imperialist. The supposed reason why Americans and others are so fond of preaching family planning is because they fear that the peoples of the Third World will become too numerous and that as a consequence power will be lost to them.

By maintaining that a reduced population growth is considered relevant to developed countries as well, the family planning advocates hope to divert attention from the real issue, which is exploitation of the poor by the rich. This implies that the argumentation is dishonest.

"We must concentrate all our efforts on family planning. New and better contraceptives should be constructed and they must be distributed in an efficient way. Sterilisation and abortion must also be given a big role".

8. Enzensberger, Hans Magnus, A Critique of Political Ecology. New Left Review. March-April 1974. (Original in German in Kursbuch 33 October 1973.)

The term 'family planning' is of recent origin. It was invented because it was considered easier to make people accept this phrase than the old term "birth control". In principle family planning also includes measures in order to help sterile couples to have children, but there can be no doubt that those who talk about family planning almost wholly think in terms of a limitation in the number of births.

There are groups who for moral reasons are opposed to dissemination of contraceptives and propaganda for their use. This is because sexual intercourse, especially in certain Christian circles, is accepted among married persons only. To disseminate contraceptives is considered to imply support of the idea that sexual intercourse can have any other purpose than procreation and will lead to promiscuity.

There is no reason to disagree with the family planning propagandists that this is an absurd attitude. Why should unmarried persons be deprived of their right to a sexual life? Moreover, in countries of the Third World nearly all grown-up persons are married.

The family planning controversy does not refer to a positive or a negative attitude towards family planning as such. In fact the most ardent non-Malthusianists are normally positive towards both contraceptives and abortion and maintain that the right to have the number of children they want should be given to all women, most of whom at present do not have access to contraceptives. A limited number of births is also a prerequisite for the liberation of women.

Why is it then that there is a controversy? The answer is that the Malthusianists create the impression that population growth is a main issue and that it is possible in this way to achieve something. In this way attention is drawn from the unequal distribution of wealth and power in society.

Sometimes the impression is created that the main point is to construct new contraceptives and to distribute them efficiently. This is obviously not correct. In countries where family planning is now general, the limitation in the number of births started long before present-day contraceptives were available. If people really want to limit their number of births they have always found the means of doing so; coitus interruptus (with-

drawal), abortion and murder of infants being the most common means used in the past.

Nobody denies that contraceptives are a better way of limiting the number of children than the other methods mentioned, but there is very little evidence that even a very efficient family planning program in a less developed country will have any considerable effect on the number of births.

This fact is more and more accepted also by the most ardent family planning enthusiasts. It is therefore somewhat amazing to find that so much weight is given to have more and more governments in countries of the Third World accept programs, governments which often have a very weak support among the population at large. One is tempted to ask if this is because there are business interests involved in the sale of contraceptives or because an official family planning program in a country makes it possible for numerous field workers to penetrate the country.

There is a risk that family planning advocates when discovering that their programs don't work, will become desperate and try to promote coercive measures. Compulsory sterilisation and other such more or less fascist measures have already been mentioned in the literature.

Why is it that efforts to spread the ideas of family planning largely fail, why is it that one can so often hear stories about contraceptives being used for quite other purposes than the intended ones? The answer is simple; it is because people are convinced that many children are to their benefit. How it worked in an Indian village has been demonstrated by Mamdani.⁹ There are furthermore many interview surveys, which confirm that the number of children, which families in countries of the Third World wish to have, is quite high and much higher than the number which, with present-day mortality, is required for the reproduction of the population. A recent survey for Ghana covering a sample of 21000 married women showed that among rural women who already had 4 to 5 children 60 per cent wanted more children than they had. For urban women the percentage was only slightly lower, 50 per cent. The women in the survey gave 6.0 children as the ideal size of a family.¹⁰ A similar sur-

9. Mamdani, Mahmood, *The Myth of Population Control: Family, Caste and Class in an Indian Village*. New York : Monthly Review Press, 1972.

10. Gaisie, S. K., *Determinants of Population Growth in Ghana*. Canberra 1973.

vey for Nigeria showed that women with 4 to 6 children wished to have 2 to 3 children more.¹¹

Occasionally similar surveys have given a result that the women express the wish for a smaller size than they have, but replies of this kind are often given in order to please the interviewer, and the tendency in any case is always the same; women wish to have a number of children much larger than what is required for reproduction.

Are these people wrong in their conviction? No, in most countries of the Third world the bulk of the population lives on agriculture, which most often is of the self-subsistent type. In agriculture of this type it is to the benefit of the family and the parents to have many children. The children are put to work at a very early stage and may already before they are 10 years old make an important contribution to the production of the household. Furthermore, the parents are very well aware of the fact that there is no other old age pension or sickness insurance than what is provided through their own children when grown up. The more children they give birth to and the more of these survive, the better the situation of the parents will be. This is the simple explanation why family planning efforts in developing countries have so little effect.¹²

The Proper Non-Malthusianist Arguments

Most of the ideological and economic discussion about population problems is void of demography, which means that arguments about population growth are in terms of annual population growth and doubling periods only. This is not satisfactory.

There is especially reason to stress that changes in mortality and fertility become manifest so slowly; we may speak about the "demographic inertia". If mortality in a population declines, there is bound to be a long period of population growth, for the simple reason that people live longer. In so far as mortality declines among children and in the younger ages, the consequence will furthermore be that the number of parents rises. The consequence will be an automatic rise in the number of births.

11. Acsadi G. I., and Igun, A. A. and Johnson, G. Z., *Surveys of Fertility, and Family Planning in Nigeria*. IPMS Publication No. 2 Ile-Ife 1972.

12. For a further exposition of these views, see Mamdani's book, quoted in note 9.

Even if the number of births per women rapidly declines to not more than what is required for reproduction, there will be a long period of rapid population increase—say 50 to 75 years.

Not long ago mortality among infants, children and young persons in most populations was so high that fertile families had to give births to many children, say 6 or even more, otherwise the population of the village or the country would soon perish. For thousands of years populations living under conditions of high mortality have been aware of this fact.

In recent decades mortality and in particular infant mortality has fallen drastically nearly everywhere. As a consequence a much reduced number of births is required in order to maintain the population—perhaps not more than three children per family on an average. Families may gradually become aware of this new situation and come to the conclusion that the number of surviving children is becoming too large. But the reaction in the form of actual measures in order to limit family size may be quite slow, unless there is also a rapid economic development.

In all developed countries the number of children has fallen to a low level in step with industrialisation. We may expect a similar development to take place in the wake of industrialisation in the countries which are now called developing. But are they really developing ?

The reason why the term "developing" has replaced the more adequate term "underdeveloped" or "less developed" is of course because the first-mentioned word creates the impression that the countries are developing. In this way the impoverishment and exploitation which take place are concealed.

The distinction between growth and development is fundamental. If it shall be possible to talk about development, all sectors of the economy must be involved. A closer scrutiny will disclose, however, that in most cases the economic growth is concentrated in certain sectors of the economy and in certain groups of the population only.

If there is rapid economic and social development, embracing all layers of the population, we can be pretty sure that there will also be a rapid decline in the number of births. But if there is one-sided growth, imply-

ing that the main bulk of the population is left behind in poverty, then the development towards a reduced number of births will be quite slow.

Breach of the present national and international power structures is a necessary pre-requisite for a comprehensive economic and social development in the Third World countries. Economic and social development of this kind is a necessity if a rapid decline in the number of births shall take place. Population thus adds to the argument that political reforms must be carried out in the Third World countries.

The UN World Population Year

United Nations documents must be written so as to please everybody. The consequence is that they are full of contradictions and in their entirety may not please anybody. But everybody can select paragraphs which can be quoted and made use of in appropriate connections. This applies to the documents produced in relation to the World Population Conference and other activities during 1974.

It is very important that people become aware of the fact that there are sharp ideological differences in the field of population. If the controversies are hidden, the false and superficial notions will dominate and people will not become aware of the real issues.

There are four ideologies in the field of population; the neo-Malthusian, the nationalist, the moral and the anti-imperialist. They ought all to come out in the open.

We may note that the advocates of the first ideology, which has been criticised at length above, have of late become more cautious than before.¹³ Family planning advocates frequently admit that their programs don't work, and there is more stress on the necessity for socio-economic development.

But most development programs don't work. We may say that the most widespread lie of our time is that the present development programs

13. A good example is Sullivan, John H. and Chester, John C., *US Aid of Population/Family Planning in Asia*. US Government Printing Office : Washington D. C. 1973.

for the countries in the Third World are leading them to the road of rapid social and economic development.

The nationalist ideology is first and foremost represented by the governments of certain countries in Latin America and Africa, which maintain that these countries welcome large families and a rapid increase in their populations. But this is a hollow argumentation; these governments have so far not taken any steps in order to provide for their present population.

The third or moral ideology seems to be disappearing in spite of the Papal Encyclica some years ago.¹⁴

Remains the fourth, anti-imperialist ideology. That this approach has gained ground recently is clearly visible from the positive interest, received by different statements prepared in relation to the World Population year and signed by a large number of people.¹⁵

14. Enzyklika *Humanae Vitae*, by Pope Paul VI, dated 25 July 1968.;

15. One such statement is headed "Population Growth and Social Development. Statement at the occasion of the World Population Year 1974". Among the original signatories are Marios Nikolinakos, Professor, Free University, Berlin West, and the author of the present article. It is obtainable from Mr Heinz Wewer, Fahrenheiststrasse 39, D-1000 Berlin 45 Germany (Berlin West). Another statement is headed "Better Lives or Fewer People ?" It is issued by Emerging Population Alternatives, c/o American Freedom from Hunger Foundation, 1100 17th Street, N. W. 701, Washington, D. C. 20036.