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Arthur J. Dyck

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Social Justice is the Only Ethical Population Policy

by

Arthur J. Dyck

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Science does not have a distinguished record when it comes to assessing population growth. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, there were scholarly treatises depicting child-bearing and child-rearing as burdens, some expressing the fear that people would soon have so few children that the very survival of the human species was at stake.¹ I was reading these scary books, telling me that children are on the wane at the very time that the post-World War II baby boom was beginning, and death rates in many parts of the world were coming down, fueling population growth.

But soon some academics spawned a whole new literature and a new fear. The new fear you can guess from the titles of some books published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as *The Population Bomb*; *Famine 1975*; and *World Population Crisis: The United States Response*.² Once again, academics led the way in yet another of history's ironies: When in 1965 I became a member of a newly formed, heavily endowed, Center for Population Studies at Harvard University, a great deal of money, energy, and scholarship was being generated at the very time when the rate of population growth in the world was beginning to decline.³ Indeed, according to a recent United Nations medium projection, the world's population will stabilize (that is, attain replacement level fertility rates [about 2.1 children per woman]) shortly after 2200.⁴

The crisis orientation to population growth died down from about the late 1970s until more recently. I see some signs of its revival presently. But the push for controlling population growth and government sponsored family planning programs for the purpose of bringing down birth rates has never seriously waned. Academics with this orientation are represented in significant numbers in the American Public Health Association and the Population Association of America; they are also found in foundations, planned parenthood organizations, and the United Nations, particularly its Population Division. How should we

think of the continuing push to spend money on family planning to slow population growth?

I want to ask and answer two basic questions about population policy: 1) Is there a moral imperative to lower current population growth rates? The answer is no! They have been declining since the 1960s and they continue to decline. 2) Would certain policies to increase social justice constitute a population policy? The answer is yes! Obtaining social justice is a population policy and the only ethically justifiable one at hand! So, to begin with:

I. There is no moral imperative to lower current population growth rates.

There are three kinds of problems that are most often cited in order to make the case for lowering birth rates: environmental disaster; starvation; and economic ruin. Let us briefly examine each of these in turn.

A. Environmental problems do not support a moral imperative to lower population growth.

With respect to environmental problems, reducing population growth will not by itself solve any environmental problems. First, because a declining population will not as such reverse behaviors responsible for environmental degradation; second, because population growth rates are declining and will foreseeably continue to do so.

1. Reducing population size does not by itself solve environmental problems. Current population policies promoted by the United States and the United Nations, lately at Cairo, seek to bring about a reduction in birth rates.⁵ If, then, these policies are successful, growth rates will decline more rapidly and populations will stabilize at replacement levels sooner than now expected. But to decrease environmental abuses and degradation by a decline in birth rates requires declines far beyond the stabilization of present populations. The late Roger Revelle, the first Director of Harvard's Center for Population Studies, has demonstrated how absurd it is to claim that programs to bring down birth rates will contribute to the solutions of significant environmental problems. Revelle has calculated how few people there would have to have been in the United States in 1965 to keep environmentally problematic practices at the level they were in 1940:

Other things being equal, the number of automobiles and the amount of gasoline and paper consumed would have remained about constant over the quarter century if our population had declined from 133 million people in 1940 to 67 million in 1965. To maintain a constant flow of sulphur dioxide in the air from electric power plants, the population would have had to decrease to only 40 million people. Presumably the amount of nitrogen fertilizers would not have increased, if all but 17 million Americans had remigrated to the homes of their ancestors. Only 17 million people in the country would use the same amount of nitrogen in 1965 as we used in 1940. The national parks would have remained as uncrowded in 1965 as they were in 1940 if our population during the interval had gone down from 133 million people in 1940 to 30 million in 1965, instead of going up to 195 million as, of course, it actually did.⁶

The point of Revelle's analysis is that environmentally deleterious behavior, what Revelle called "our filthy habits," and our affluence grow much faster than our population.

And, if there are no changes in the behavior that degrades the environment, environmental degradation grows as affluence grows. Furthermore, if, as many population experts assert, decreasing population growth will increase affluence, then policies designed to accomplish population decline are policies that will actually increase environmental deterioration, unless, of course, environmentally deleterious behaviors are appropriately and sufficiently changed. And so, for example, India, with a population program and declining birth rate, is expanding its industries. And, yes, already I have listened to a special segment on National Public Radio expressing alarm over the growth of heavily polluting manufacturing plants in India. Obviously, such environmentally abusive behavior has to be addressed directly and urgently. Promising to cure or ameliorate environmental ills through attempts at population control contributes to false hopes for what can be accomplished. Environmental abuses require direct action.

In our legitimate concerns for the environment, we should not neglect the heart of the matter. Good stewardship of the environment is something we do, not only for our own good, but especially for the good of our children and their children. Strong family ties and loyalties support every effort to keep the earth a beautiful and bountiful place for our offspring. The Christian affirmation of the goodness of God's creation and of God's command to replenish it, is a solid, realistic basis for sound environmental behavior. Good stewardship is anchored in the recognition that life is sacred and all innocent human life is inviolable.

2. *Population growth is a limited phenomenon.* We know that hunter-gatherer societies have always kept their population levels in balance with their natural resources. Modern societies, until recently, have not had such direct and realistic knowledge of their environmental limits, given the enormous productivity of agriculture, the effectiveness of public health measures, and the benefits of wealth created by innovations. But now we have sophisticated methods for ascertaining our limits and capabilities. On the one side, our wealthiest societies and couples have the realistic confidence that their children will enjoy a high life expectancy. On the other side, we can better estimate how far we can go in producing food and how much arable land is in the world for accomplishing that. But whatever the reasons, the rate of population growth in the world is falling.⁷ That rate is falling most rapidly in the wealthiest nations.⁸ There is, then, no clear basis at the present time for the argument that population growth is unlimited and therefore something must be done lest the space in the world for human beings, and the resources to sustain them, be irrevocably lost. Population growth, it is estimated, will peak at 11.6 billion around the year 2200.⁹

B. The need for food does not support a moral imperative to lower population growth

Can 11.6 billion people be adequately fed? Yes. At the same time, ignorance, political instability, and unjust governments can, as they do now, lead to malnourishment and starvation for some.

1. *Population growth and adequate food supplies.* Revelle's estimate is that it is technically possible to feed up to 38 to 48 billion. That conservative estimate has

has not been seriously challenged to my knowledge.¹⁰ Also, there is presently no lack of food in the world to feed its people. Why then are there famines and starvation?

2. *Famines, starvation, and malnourishment are not due to population growth.* We do not have scholarly research on famines. B.M. Bhatia found that, in India, there were famines in the nineteenth century caused by genuine food shortages. But in the twentieth century, famines are attributed to distribution problems and to the tendency for the price of food to rise sharply in periods of relative scarcity.¹¹ Poor people in India or any country starve or are malnourished because they lack money or the knowledge of nutritional requirements. Mass starvation of whole populations occur when there is civil strife, instability, or corruption. Most recently Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, and Sudan demonstrate the ravages of civil war and gross instability. Note that these are relatively sparsely populated areas as compared with the well fed, crowded areas of Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Netherlands, for example. To blame famines on the number of people in a given region, with what we know now, is grossly irresponsible.

C. Economic realities do not support a moral imperative to lower population growth

The question is simple enough: Is rapid population growth a serious obstacle to economic development? The answer, however, is not simple. It does depend, in part, on who you ask and what statistics you select or develop. Still, we do know some things. The industrialized nations became immensely more wealthy during a period of very rapid increases in their populations. We know also that moderate population growth acts as an economic stimulus. At the same time, there are situations in which a rapid rise in the work force and children of school age can create hardships, such as insufficient jobs and schooling, and a depression in the wages for those who can find work.¹² In short, population growth has had, and can have, positive economic benefits; it can also have negative economic effects.

Those who focus on certain adverse consequences of rapid population growth have had considerable influence on United States and United Nations policy to support family planning programs around the world.¹³ They say that family planning programs "cannot make a poor country rich, but they can help make it less poor."¹⁴ But even if we grant that some countries would benefit economically from slower growth, granting that does not answer the question as to what is the most effective way to slow population growth; more importantly, granting that does not answer the question as to what is the just way to accomplish that. Population experts agree that it is the more affluent countries with their low death rates and high literacy rates which also have low birth rates, some now below replacement levels.¹⁵ This makes a strong case for economic development as a clearly effective means to slow population growth. For example, better strains of rice and other grains (the green revolution) introduced in India have led to lower birth rates as parents have the income to expect their children to survive, attend school, and find new economic opportunities.¹⁶

But many who advocate family planning programs, as in the Cairo document,

agree that economic development should also be fostered. Money should be spent for both. That is what the United States has been doing since the presidency of Lyndon Johnson, except for the cutbacks by Reagan and Bush in support for any family planning programs offering abortion and practicing coercion. As we know, President Clinton has reversed the Reagan and Bush policies. To some, funding family planning programs just seems a self-evident way to increase opportunities for poor people.

But the debate should not be carried on at such an abstract level. Poor families and their children should not be viewed as obstacles to economic development unless they accept modern methods of birth control and abortions to reduce the size of their families. Rather, the question for governments concerned about economic development and population growth should be: What ought to be offered to poor families so that it is a just expectation that they can plan and provide for their children?

II. Social justice is the only ethically justifiable population policy

A. Economic Justice

A Harvard economist, the late Simon Kuznitz, pinpointed the issue several years ago: There are those who *invest by having children*; there are those who *invest in* their children. Those who invest *in* their children have the means to help them educationally, medically, and in numerous other ways essential to their economic and general well-being. Those who invest by having children do not have such means. But why have a large family while poor? In some situations, it is a hedge against the possibility of losing a number of children in infancy or soon thereafter. In many countries children are needed to help their parents in their work or as security when the parents can no longer work. But for people in poverty a major reason is to have hope for the future. This outlook is well represented and eloquently expressed by an African American woman I have cited in several articles. She is responding to the efforts in her area of Boston to reduce births through the introduction of free-standing birth control clinics.

The worst of it is that they try to get you to plan your kids by the year; except they mean by the ten-year plan, one every ten years. The truth is, they don't want you to have any, if they could help it. To me having a baby inside me is the only time I'm really alive. I know I can make something, do something, no matter what color my skin is, and what names people call me. When the baby gets born . . . you can see the little one grow and get larger and start doing things, and you feel there must be some hope, some chance that things will get better. . . The children and their father feel it too, just like I do. They feel the baby is a good sign, or at least he's some sign. If we didn't have that, what would be the difference from death? Even without children my life would still be bad — they're not going to give us what they have, the birth control people. They just want us to be a poor version of them only without our children and our faith in God and our tasty fried food, or anything.¹⁷

This woman has stated the heart of the matter: How can you morally justify offering her birth control when “even without children” her “life would still be bad”?

The whole idea of funding birth control clinics for the poor is misguided as well as unjust. The transition from high to low birth rates in the industrialized nations occurred without government programs designed to do that, and without the use of modern contraceptives, since they were not yet invented. Furthermore, it is not simply affluence for a nation as a whole which will assure lower birth rates. The key to lowering birth rates lies in the extensiveness of the distribution of income and of social services. After analyzing considerable data, William Rich concluded that

developmental policies that focus on participation and increased access to benefits for the population as a whole do seem to produce a major impact on family size. In countries which have a relatively equitable distribution of health and education services, and which provide land, credit, and other income opportunities, the cumulative effect of such policies seems to be that the poorest half of the population is vastly better off than it is in countries with equal or higher levels of per capita GNP and poor distribution patterns. The combined effects of such policies has made it possible for some countries to reduce birth rates despite their relatively low levels of national production.¹⁸

Economic justice is a morally justifiable population policy. And it is effective. Pope Paul VI, in *Popularum Progressio*, had it right in his excellent analysis of the relation between economic justice and population growth.

B. Familial Justice

As I have tried to make clear so far, there is no moral imperative for family planning programs. But, what is more, the advocates of family planning espouse views that tend to undermine the family, specifically married couples, as the unit with the responsibility and right to make procreative decisions. Increasingly, family planning is portrayed as an *individual* responsibility and right.

In 1968, at the International Conference on Human Rights in Teheran, it was "parents" who were said to have a basic right to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children."¹⁹ Then in 1974, the World Population Plan of Action issued by the Bucharest Conference stated that "All couples and individuals have the basic right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children and to have the information, education, and means to do so . . ." ²⁰ Note that this document asserts that *individuals*, as well as couples, not only have a right to make procreative decisions but a right to the means to make such decisions. Notice also that "couples" are not identified as either married or unmarried. The Cairo plan followed suit. This means that it is not necessary for an individual to be married to demand, as a basic right, that governments assure the means to avoid having children if and when they desire these means. Indeed, that right is made an explicit rationale for governmentally supported family planning programs designed to reduce high fertility (birth rates): "Involuntary high fertility may infringe upon a person's human right to choose his or her family size."²¹ This statement was contained in the "Final Report of the Seventy-first American Assembly" in 1986.²² This rationale was used to argue that the United States government has an obligation to support United Nations population programs, as well as non-governmental organizations making contraceptives and

abortions available in the so-called developing nations. To fail to do so is regarded as frustrating the exercise of this individual, fundamental right to access to contraception and abortion. This thinking fueled the Cairo Conference recommendations as well. The Cairo document never explicitly cites the marital bond as the locus of procreative decision-making. It should be noted that the literature used by Planned Parenthood for educational purposes thoroughly individualizes procreative decisions, and this applies also to children below the age of eighteen in relation to their own parents.

It is important to emphasize that there are no empirical analyses of population-related problems which provide any basis for legitimating this individualization of procreative decisions. Nor are there any empirical analyses that make government intervention of this kind, or of any other kind, necessary for reducing population growth. As indicated earlier, reductions in birth rates without government programs for that purpose have occurred before, occur now, and are expected in the future. In short, there is no moral justification for policies that would undermine the family structures that have evolved and which have been undergirded by Christian traditions.

The individualization of procreative decisions and the lack of explicit policies to strengthen families permeates American law. This is especially evident, as Professor Mary Ann Glendon of Harvard Law School has amply documented, in the areas of abortion and divorce laws.²³ In contrast to the United States, European countries discourage divorce and abortion, and at the same time offer incentives and/or support to those who have children, and to those who remain together in their marriages. America's family policies are implicit, and they strongly tend to weaken families and isolate individuals from one another. Abortion, for example, is depicted as a right to privacy, shielded by law from the scrutiny and advice of loving parents and spouses. The story United States' divorce laws tell about marriage is one Glendon has summarized as follows:

Marriage is a relationship that exists primarily for the fulfillment of the individual spouses. If it ceases to perform this function, no one is to blame and either spouse may terminate it at will. After divorce, each spouse is expected to be self-sufficient. If this is not possible with the aid of property division, some rehabilitative maintenance may be in order for a temporary period. Children hardly appear in the story . . .²⁴

It is not surprising given this story that the United States divorce rates are high and that divorce is a major source of the increased proportion of children in poverty. The income of non-custodial parents rises; the income of custodial parents, mainly women, declines.²⁵ To make matters worse, United States tax laws are such that the deductions for children are small, do not keep up with inflation, and do not help the poor. Child support is not only inadequate but discouraged, since it is not tax deductible for non-custodial parents. In Glendon's words, "American divorce law in practice seems to be saying to parents, especially mothers, that it is not safe to devote oneself primarily or exclusively to raising children."²⁶ What a terrible disincentive to finding hope, through investing in your children, and through nurturing their moral, spiritual, and intellectual powers.

What Can Be Done To Increase Familial Justice?

1. Develop explicit family policies that strengthen families as procreative units. With a view to strengthening the family as procreative unit, tax laws that are unfair to married couples should be changed. Note, for example, that a married couple does not receive as much of a standard deduction as two single individuals. Given the costs of education, particularly higher education, parents should receive a great deal more tax relief to retain their income for helping their children. That tax relief should be increased in a timely fashion to keep pace with inflation. Divorce should be made more difficult, particularly for those who have children. Financial support for one's children should be required of non-custodial parents, but tax laws should facilitate, not penalize, such financial support. Much more realistic amounts of support should be exacted by the courts in divorce cases. Current levels of child support are woefully inadequate to say the least.

Health coverage is a necessity if parents are to be encouraged to stay together and to stay out of poverty. To give medical coverage to individual women with children who are not working, while some working individuals and couples (an estimated 25 million, two-thirds of 37 million Americans) are without health coverage, discourages men in low-paying jobs from supporting children they have sired. I am not, however, in favor of any plan for universal health coverage which tries to save money by rationing care. When it comes to providing care, the Good Samaritan had it right. He promised to pay more if more was needed to take care of the wounded one he found on the Jericho road. (If you want to save big money for medical care, reduce vices such as violence, smoking, and substance abuse.)

2. Support families through medical and public health services. Maternal and child health clinics in the United States have helped reduce infant mortality and birth rates among the poor; birth control clinics have been largely subsidies for the middle class. There is no reason for the United States to support Planned Parenthood in the United States or in other countries; there are, as I have suggested, good reasons not to do so, given their views of procreation and abortion. Why not target the money, in this country and in others, so that those who cannot now assure their health and the spacing of their children, receive help. There is every reason to do that; It is just; it saves lives; it engenders hope; and from all we know, it reduces family size on average, as families try to do more for the children they have.

3. Support economic justice — discussed above. Helping families economically increases freedom. It does not dictate family size or send signals that children are a burden. As Christians, we acknowledge that we are commanded by God to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. Sound population policies would be in support of that commandment. Justice, in accord with human dignity and human rights, demands no less of us. Economic and familial justice are population policies and they are effective as such.

I do not, as do so many population experts, prophesy doom and gloom. Recall for a moment Ezekiel's visions (Chapter 37). At a time when many people have recently starved to death, and many others have been uprooted from their homes

and land, it is good to remember Ezekiel's people in exile, far from their homeland. Ezekiel first sees a valley full of dry bones, "very many dry bones," a reference to his people suffering in exile. Most population experts point us to a valley of many dry bones now, and more to come in the future, as many die on earth no longer able to sustain them. Too many people, they say, and too many bones. But what such doomsayers do not see, and Ezekiel does, is that these many bones will live. The word of the Lord to Ezekiel was "O my people . . . you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I the Lord have spoken and will act."²⁷ I am on Ezekiel's side in the population debate about whether our bones will dry up or live.

This world should have people in it. Human beings are created by God and blessed with the gift of procreation. As human beings, we have the capacity to bring children into the world, and to do so in a most intimate and joyous fulfillment of our marital vows. Any discussion of population policies should begin and end in gratitude for life and for our God-given abilities to love others into being and fulfillment.

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