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THE IDEOLOGICAL PREMISES OF WESTERN RESEARCH
IN THE FIELD OF POPULATION POLICY
(SESSION X)
by
Pierre Pradervand
(A.F.S.C. Representative for Family Planning
and Population Education in West Africa)

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Pierre Pradervand
A.F.S.C. Representative for Family Planning
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1. Necessity of an epistemological critique

Anyone even mildly familiar with western literature in the field of population policy cannot help but be struck by the extent to which ideology, most often neo-Malthusian 1/, permeates most of the thinking; this usually is covered up by a veneer of scientific language which peels off easily when approached epistemologically. As the introductory quote from Myrdal stresses, this tendency represents a fairly general bias common to almost all knowledge 2/. These ideological 3/ biases could be considered simply as one more example of the folklore of academia if they did not have serious and far-reaching practical and political implications; for example, the attempt of some western nations and organizations to impose a neo-Malthusian view of the development process on the Third World. In this paper, I will attempt to outline the "right" steps in the scientific approach to a problem, and to illustrate briefly how these steps are generally ignored in the field of population. 4/

2. Analysis of words and concepts

Social scientists and demographers frequently use everyday words, giving them a supposedly scientific meaning. Because they rarely bother to analyze the words and concepts they use and too often haphazardly borrow words already laden with numerous connotations, the result is simply to incorporate common prejudices into what is supposed to be a scientific discourse.

An outstanding example of this is the use—even by the most prestigious demographers — of the word population "explosion" to describe recent demographic trends in the Third World. The word is misleading, giving the impression of something sudden, almost accidental, and discourages a careful search for causes. Such a search undertaken would reveal the main cause of this so-called "explosion" to lie in the economic and social distortions imposed upon the developing areas by the colonial powers 5/. When using this expression, an author even managed to evoke the ghost of some demonic libido rampant in underdeveloped regions, as J. Robbins does in his book Too Many Asians (a revealing title) who writes, "At the root of Asia's problem of population is copulation" (sic) 6/.

* The views expressed in this paper are the sole responsibility of their author and do not express the opinions of the American Friends Service Committee.

More revealing still is the fact that the word "explosion" is used only to describe the population growth of underdeveloped countries, never to describe the huge increase in consumption of non-renewable resources of industrialized nations, although there can be no doubt left that, in terms of environmental deterioration and stress on the world's ecosystem, this consumption has exercised much greater strain than the population increase of the Third World.

Another example of this semantic fuzziness is the use of words such as "conservative" to describe people desiring large families and "liberal" the others 7/: the African peasant with two wives and a yearly per capita income of \$70, who hopes for 8 children is a "conservative", as opposed to the "liberal" who wants a smaller family even if he has a higher income and thus consumes more non-renewable resources. Words become meaningless in such a context. Other examples: "over" and "under-" population, optimum population.

3. Defining "the problem"

The very acknowledgement that something constitutes a problem is a value judgement. The definition of a situation, or a "problem" is of the greatest importance because to a large extent it already implies the solution which will be applied to it. A growing number of western analysts of the Third World outline population growth as if not the major obstacle to development, at least as a very serious one. Most of the time, they are sincerely surprised that one can contest this view - for, as G. Myrdal so aptly states, "Ideologies, to those holding them, have always appeared to be simple and indisputable conclusions from obvious facts" 8/. The fact that quite a few African countries consider population growth as beneficial is overlooked as a momentary aberration which can hopefully be rectified by the proper dosage of western economic wisdom.

Rarely are the main difficulties of these countries stressed, i.e. their political structures, the quasi-colonial domination of their economies by the western powers, the institutional infrastructure legated by the prior colonial powers: factors which are, by any standard, as important, if not more so, than population growth. Why then pinpoint population growth in defining the problem rather than any of these other factors? There is absolutely no scientific basis for this approach. Again quoting G. Myrdal, who has such a clear vision of the ideological biases of western research:

" biases operate through the selection of strategic factors on which interest is focused and of assumptions about their role in historical processes. This selection of strategic factors and of assumptions about their role remains essentially a priori however much illustrative material is amassed. It never is empirically verified or refuted. " 9/

Recent history offers some interesting examples of so-called economic "take-offs" despite population growth rates of 3 per cent or even above (Taiwan, Albania, Outer Mongolia, etc.) 10/, although the neo-Malthusian school usually "explains away" the first case as an "exception" and conveniently ignores

the last two. Using the accepted approach of the sociology of knowledge, the reason for this bias has to be looked for in the social and political backgrounds of its proponents, those who suggest that "less than five dollars invested in population control is worth a hundred dollars invested in economic growth" to quote the now classical comment made in 1965 by US President Johnson. In their short-run view, it is evidently cheaper and politically more palatable to cut down on the numbers of those born in underdeveloped areas than on their own consumption. This corresponds to the logic of the neo-Malthusian dilemma, as the dean of French demographers, A. Sauvy, stressed many years ago:

"With 8 per cent of the world's surface and 5.6*per cent of the world's population, they (USA) consume 50*per cent of the world's production. This consideration leads them, if not to consciously slow down the development of the underdeveloped nations, at least to adopt an attitude which goes in this direction.... In other words, if there is not a rapid increase of the world production of raw materials, accompanied by progress in the use of these materials, the mercantilist policy of the developed nations competes with world population growth. It would only be coherent and logical if, suddenly, the population of the underdeveloped countries was, for instance, reduced by one half. 11/"

Another example, among many, of false definitions leading to biased conclusions can be found in many western economists' evaluations of the costs" of family planning: by defining the cost of family planning as the cost of contraceptive services in Taiwan or South Korea, these economists manage to "sell" family planning as a "cheap" investment. 12/ Despite the obvious fallacy behind their whole approach, they only take into account the "marketing" of the product, the final cost of clinical services. But in fact, this is very misleading as the lower the level of development of a country, the fewer the number of "motivated" women and thus the higher the cost of getting family planning adopted. In other words, the cost of promoting the adoption of family planning should in fact be spread over the whole development process. I would go so far as to say that for quite a few African countries - the countries of the sub-Sahara belt for instance - 5 dollars in health development (such as malaria eradication) are probably worth 100 dollars spent on trying to get contraception adopted by these very high mortality populations.

The theory of the demographic transition is another example of how, behind a facade of scientific serenity, evident biases are operating. The theory is too well known for me to need to summarize it here. There is hardly any "theory" in this banal interpretation of events, apart from its pompous title. One of its main weaknesses lies in its ahistorical nature: it outlines 3 - 4 "stages" which supposedly have universal validity. Furthermore, it has a "technological" bias inasmuch as the main causative factor of the mortality decline in the Third World is attributed to the large-scale use of cheap public health techniques. What is more natural than to offer a "technological" solution to what is supposed to be an accident occasioned by technology? In the words of one of the world's foremost family planning experts speaking in 1964 of the I.U.D., "I do truly believe that this simple device can, and hopefully will, change the history of the world. 13/"

It is possible to explain the demographic transition, however, in very different terms from the technological ones outlined above. For instance, it seems clear that the rapid population increase occurred because the colonial powers had completely broken down the social structure of the former colonies, and especially had not, until too late, made any significant attempts at real economic development. They created the motivation for health care, but did not modernize the countries, which would have created a strong motivation for birth control, as happened in Europe despite the unavailability of contraceptives. The advantage of this last explanation is that it lays the onus for the responsibility of the so-called population "explosion" where it should really lie - on the ex-colonial powers, not on "neutral" elements such as D.D.T., etc. This might not seem of overriding importance until one starts calculating the real costs of population control, defined not as the simple marketing of pills and loops but as creating also the whole motivational basis for contraception, in other terms, the costs of real development.

4. Defining concepts

Having defined the problem, it is important to define with equal care the concepts one is going to use to approach it. No zoologist would attempt to discuss the characteristics of an animal without situating it carefully in the family, species, etc., to which it belongs, any more than an astronomer would attempt a discourse on a given nebula without situating it on a stellar map, defining its type, etc. Why, then, are social scientists - who by definition operate in a field of fuzzier and changing concepts - not as careful? Having made a careful study of definitions (and worse still, the lack of definitions) used in the field of population policy over the past years, I have been amazed at the semantic anarchy which reigns in this area. Demographers and sociologists of great prestige write on the topic of population without defining it, sometimes whole books are written without a precise definition of the term. 14/ Definitions are the exception rather than the rule.

Defining a topic carefully forces an author to state his various premises so that the reader is aware of them. This is hardly ever the case of contemporary population literature. Most of the studies in this area have a decidedly neo-Malthusian bias, in that the author usually discusses measures aimed at birth control, generally concentrating on the area of family planning. Intended or unintended - and most writers in this area are so wrapped up in their western value-judgements as to not even be aware of their biases - this results in eliminating from the discussion of population policy the numerous measures related to general development which are certainly the most potent creators of "contraceptive motivation", as D. V. Glass has pointed out:

"Direct programmes for spreading the use of birth control are, however, only a small part of the action in which developing societies will require to engage. The largest part will have to consist of planned economic and social development - and development at a considerably higher rate than appears to have been evident so far. This will be needed because, without an improvement in levels of living, birth control programmes may well be an empty framework. 15/".

5. Elaborating a theory

Any population policy which wishes to at least attempt basing itself on scientific knowledge implies some understanding of causal relations in the field of fertility and contraception: if we suggest certain measures - e.g. decreasing maternal allowances - it implies that we have some clear evidence that maternal allowances are a booster to fertility. Do we? The sad fact is that there is as yet not even a semblance of agreement among specialists on anything that could pretend to the name of fertility theory 16/.

Yet, as G. Myrdal has stressed:

"Theory, therefore, must always be a priori to the empirical observations of the facts. Facts come to mean something only as ascertained and organized in the frame of a theory. Indeed, facts as part of scientific knowledge have no existence outside such a frame. Questions must be asked before answers can be obtained and, in order to make sense, the questions must be part of a logically co-ordinated attempt to understand social reality as a whole. A non-theoretical approach is, in strict logic, unthinkable.

Underlying and steering every systematic attempt to find out the truth about society, there is therefore always a theory: a vision of what the essential facts and the causal relations between them are. This theory which determines the direction of research should always be made explicit. The danger of keeping the theory implicit - as unstated reasons for asking the particular questions that are asked, and of organizing the findings in the way they are organized - is, of course, that it escapes criticism. 17/ "

In other words, we are working in this area on the basis of "implicit theory", hunches, intuition, incomplete knowledge - which inevitably come to reflect national or class biases, ethnocentric views of the world and other viewpoints of dubious scientific value. The habit of "implicit theory" is the reason why the field of population policy measures is such a pot pourri of ideas, from the nuttiest (like pouring sterilizing agents into the drinking water of these all-too-prolific people of the Third World) to the most reasonable. 18/ Not only must we conclude that there can be no "scientific population policies" - the expression is a contradiction in terms - but we must humbly acknowledge that we are operating on the basis of biased and insufficient data, making guesses in the dark which we can never check because the subject matter of our study is continually changing.

We may put our inadequate data into computers and, with the aid of esoteric formulas, bring out "impressive" tables, much in the manner of a game, but let us not deceive ourselves ultimately: even a "scientific" approach is a "biased" approach - in a very fundamental sense. For it studies, on the basis of material observation, what was or is, and then deducts from that what could possibly be, given certain circumstances. It might be altogether better to start from an openly normative standpoint: here is what we should attain, let us begin educating people on how to attain this end.

This has been the Chinese approach, and from the most recent information, it would seem this country - which only a few decades ago or less was described in almost hopeless terms by the neo-Malthusians 19/ - is in the process of becoming the first large country of the Third World to have started decisively lowering its birth rate. 20/ If this is really so - and I believe it is - then the implications are tremendous for population policy, especially as the birth control programmes in India and Pakistan, after years of effort, have failed to make any significant impact on the birth rate in the respective countries.

6. Methodological premises.

Methodology can be divided into two categories:

a. The basic methodological approach: by this I mean the type of viewpoint used with respect to the problem, e.g. sociological versus anthropological, institutional vs. non-institutional, (social psychological, etc.) historical vs. non-historical, etc.

In general, research in the field of family planning - which dominates the whole field of population policy - tends to be demographically oriented, technological, non-institutional and ahistorical. The approach is admirably suited for side-stepping some of the most crucial issues in the area of underdevelopment, especially problems of social structure and change. By concentrating on nice theories about "machismo" and "husband-wife communication", one desteps the issues of the historical development of machismo in a male-oriented, feudal-capitalist society. The methodology predetermines the results, and it is not surprising that talented researchers conclude that husband-wife communication, (rather than political change, economic development, etc.) is the key to contraceptive adoption: given the basic methodology, they could hardly have arrived at very different results. 21/

The most striking aspect of this approach is its evident politically conservative bias. This bias is clearly seen in the whole area of "communications" research so often aimed at convincing people to adopt family planning by generous dosages of propaganda and contraceptive information. Thus a recent study of very low-income inhabitants living in the worst type of urban slum characterized by extremely high infant mortality, high unemployment, quasi inexistent sanitation, etc. aimed at defining how to get them to adopt contraception without any change in their environmental conditions. 22/

b. Technical procedures: if anything appears immune to value biases, it is the technical procedures used in social science. KAP surveys are one evidence of the contrary, i.e. how an apparently "neutral" technique can disguise a whole ideology. These surveys, based on western and thus ethnocentric polling techniques, have, according to one of their main promoters, a clear market orientation. Thus Stycos, a pioneer in the field of KAP surveys (Knowledge Attitude and Practice of family planning) has candidly acknowledged that "the most important function of such surveys is similar to any market research project: to demonstrate the existence of a demand for

goods and services, in this case for birth control. 23/. One cannot help but question if such an attitude is really conducive to serious scientific research. Yet, there is probably no field of the social sciences today where similar methods have been used on such a broad cross-cultural scale. It is also my opinion that the attitudinal aspect of these surveys represents, from a methodological point of view, exceptionally poor research, and a growing number of specialists are expressing their skepticism concerning the validity of many of these surveys. Poorly-trained interviewers are sent to question rapidly and in a totally artificial setting illiterate women on problems they have never heard about before. The questionnaires are often written by foreign experts who know little of the local culture, do not speak the local languages or dialects, and have often lived only a few weeks in the country. The results of such surveys tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies, and they nearly all show, in varying degrees, that the people interviewed have favourable opinions toward family planning. Their use (one should almost write "abuse") in Africa has led to rather astonishing conclusions on the high numbers of African women "interested" in family planning. Not one single one of these surveys in Africa has even broached the problem of infertility. Yet, any person with medical experience in Africa knows that many more women are preoccupied with infertility - in a ratio of 5 - 1 to 7 - 1 depending on the areas - than with contraception. By simply omitting a topic, these surveys thus convey a very biased picture of the real fertility aspirations of African women.

The questionable scientific validity of many of these surveys does not seem to disturb many people, and a knowledgeable observer, after criticizing them for this very reason, openly admitted what most people who have worked in this field already know; i.e., that these surveys, apart from their scientific aspect, are used as instruments of political pressure. ".... KAP survey results, erraneous or not, have helped to persuade prime ministers, parliaments, and the general population to move in a desirable direction and have provided family planning programme administrators with 'justification' for budget and programmes." 24/

8. Conclusions

All policy suggestions are by definition "biased" inasmuch as they represent value judgements on a particular situation, and population policy is no exception to this. What is more preoccupying though is that, by what is evidently no accidental occurrence, the biases we have outlined above tend to all concur in the same direction: population policy is more often than not defined as population control; the favourite means of population control is birth control (euphemistically termed "family planning" most of the time, even when there is little or no emphasis on the family); obstacles to the adoption of contraception are located mainly on the technological level: higher adoption rates are, following a now well-known litany, defined as being essentially a question of better administration, more research, greater emphasis on communications and, above all, the "ideal contraceptive".

These efforts are, no doubt, also needed, but to lay such emphasis on these and so little on the structural changes indispensable to accelerate the development of a strong contraceptive motivation; never even to allude to the

trade relations between rich and poor nations by which the rich give a little with one hand and take back a lot with the other; to make "population control" the absolute precondition of economic development, 25/ when it is painfully evident that population control will do little or no good to countries with corrupt or reactionary political systems, or in a situation of neocolonial domination, or with such high levels of mortality and such minimal levels of modernization that people will not want to adopt birth control; to suggest all these things is at best an acute case of myopia, and bad faith at the worst. In the long run, this goes against the best interests both of the industrialized and underdeveloped nations, and is already creating a backlash against family planning and/or population control in some nations. For, as Professor F. Okediji said in this same city just over a year ago:

"The developed nations must re-examine their economic and ideological policies which also contribute to the underdevelopment of the nations of the Third World. Their enthusiasm in financing and organizing family planning clinics in most of the nations of the Third World will be misconstrued as a political gimmick to control the population of the latter, unless they (the rich nations) liberalize their economic arrangements with the developing countries." 26/

There are so many excellent and evident "humanitarian" reasons to adopt family planning that it baffles me that even distinguished social scientists have to go through considerable intellectual gymnastics to try and press the idea of population control on unwilling nations of the Third World. This will not advance their cause one iota, and probably will retard it considerably. My feeling is that "population control" in tropical Africa will not succeed on a large scale until a considerably higher level of development has been attained. Instead of clamoring loudly for a more rapid adoption of birth control in underdeveloped countries, the rich nations - which include the eastern bloc - should take really significant measures towards boosting the economic and social development of these areas. This would be the most important contribution to the creation of the contraceptive motivation necessary for the adoption of family planning and, in a long term perspective, the most valuable means of population control conceivable today.

FOOTNOTES

1. I take the word neo-Malthusian in a broad sense, i.e. implying that population growth is the main or an essential obstacle to economic and social development. (See illustrations under 4).
2. For a broader perspective on this issue, see the introduction to Asian Drama by the same author, Pantheon, N.Y., 1968, and also P. Streeten, edit., Value in Social Theory, Routledge, London, 1958.
3. I am taking "ideological" in the sense of representing the vested interests of one group or a specific "Weltanschauung" (world view). Even the scientific approach can become an ideology, but most of the time it is simply characterized by epistemological bias (an inevitable component of its materialistic basis).
4. My definition of these steps owes a great deal to the excellent book by P. Bourdieu et al, Le Métier de Sociologue, Mouton, Bordas, Paris, 1968, one of the most compelling studies stressing the necessity for a radical epistemological critique in the social sciences. I plan to publish a more extensive and more thoroughly documented study of this problem in a book on population policies in Africa (forthcoming).
5. I have illustrated this point in a recent book, Introduction au Planning Familial et à la Limitation des Naissances dans le Tiers Monde, Montreal, 1971.
6. J. Robbins, Too Many Asians, Doubleday, N.Y., 1959, p. 173.
7. c.f. D.I. Pool, "The attitude of urban males towards family size and family limitation," Studies in Family Planning, No. 60, Dec. 1970, p. 12-17. The use of quotation marks by the author does not excuse the intrusion of such politically biased terms into what is meant to be an "objective" description.
8. G. Myrdal, Asian Drama, op.cit., Vol. 2, p. 973
9. G. Myrdal, op.cit., Vol. 3, p. 1847.
10. See for instance W. Petersen, "Taiwan's Population Problem," in S. Chandrasekhar, Asia's Population Problems, Praeger, N.Y. 1967; G. Bès, "La République de Mongolie: une renaissance économique sur un bouclier stratégique," Tiers Monde 11(44), Oct.-Dec. 1970, pp. 815-32; M. Sivignon, "Quelques données démographiques sur la République Populaire d'Albanie," Revue de Géographie de Lyon, 45(1), 1970, pp. 61-74 and A. Baba Miské, "L'expérience albanaise - un exemple pour le Tiers Monde," Africasia, No. 21, Aug. 3 - 30, 1970.

11. A. Sauvy, Théorie Générale de la Population, P.U.F., Paris, 1954, Vol. 2, p. 216, (my translation). *The original figures quoted by Sauvy in 1954 were 9.5 and 60 per cent. I have corrected them for obvious reasons.
12. The references are innumerable. S. Enke, "Birth control for economic development", Science, 1964, May 16, 1969, pp. 798-802, and chap. 8 in G. Ohlin, Régulation Démographique et Croissance Economique, OECD, Paris, 1967, are classical examples.
13. B. Berelson, "Application of intra-uterine contraception in family planning programs", 2nd International Conference on Intra-Uterine Contraception, N.Y., 1964.
14. e.g., W.D. Borrie, Population Trends and Policies, Australasian Publishing House, Sydney, 1948; R.M. Titmuss and B. Abel-Smith, Social Policies and Population Growth in Mauritius, Methuen, London, 1961; G. Ohlin, op.cit.
15. D. V. Glass, "Population Growth and Population Policy," in M. Sheps and J. C. Ridley, eds., Public Health and Population Change, University of Pittsburg Press, Pittsburg, 1965, p. 23. In my opinion, the best definition is that given by H. T. Eldridge in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. 12, p. 381.
16. c.f. the recent view of the field by G. Hawthorn, The Sociology of Fertility, Collier-Macmillan, London, 1970.
17. G. Myrdal, "The logical crux of all science," in P. Streeten, ed., op.cit.
18. For an excellent study of the whole field, see the now classical essay by B. Berelson, Beyond Family Planning, Studies in Family Planning, 38, February 1969.
19. c.f. Problems of Overpopulation, Vol. II of M. Sanger, ed. Vith International and Neomalthusian Birth Control Conference, N.Y., 1926.
20. c.f. P.C. Chen, China's Birth Control Action Program 1956-64, Population Studies, 24(2), July 1970; by the same author, Population Policy in China (in press); H. Suyin, Family Planning in China, Japan Quarterly, 17(4); 1970, pp. 433-42. J. Salaff, The institutional motivation for fertility control in the People's Republic of China, (MS. 24 March 1971), etc., and personal sources. My conclusion is an informed guesstimate inferred from numerous data, as China hasn't had any recent census.
21. c.f. R. Hill et al., The Family and Population Control, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1959.

22. J. M. Stycos and P. G. Marden, An Assessment of Fertility and an Evaluation of Health and Family Planning Programs in Las Crucitas, Tegucigalpa, U.S.A.I.D., Tegucigalpa, 103 p. Extracts appeared in Studies in Family Planning, 57, Sept. 1970, pp. 20-24.
23. J. Stycos, "Survey research and population control in Latin America," in N. Berelson et al. Sample Surveys and Population Control, Public Opinion Quarterly, 28, Fall 1964, p. 368.
24. P. M. Hauser, "Family Planning and Population Programs: a book review article", Demography, 4(1), 1967, p. 405, (underscoring mine).
25. c.f. "Population growth is the greatest obstacle to economic growth in much of the underdeveloped world, "Congressional Record, Vol. 112, Oct. 25, 1966, p.184.
26. F. Okediji, at an IPPF Conference on family planning education in Africa held in Accra, Fall 1970, as quoted in West Africa, Dec. 26, 1970 - Jan. 1, 1971 in article "Birth Control Aid for Africa". The author is acting head of the Department of Sociology, University of Ibadan, and well-known for his research in the area of fertility.