



nota

# THE MYTH OF A POPULATION EXPLOSION IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

Lillian T. Cochran  
James M. O'Kane

To the uninformed public, arguments about future demographic catastrophes seem to have an inherent truth to them. This is particularly true in nations such as the United States where both intellectual circles and the general public are daily exposed to emotional terms and inundated with slogans such as «future population doomsday», «standing-room only world», «stop-at-two», «population explosion», etc. Countless organizations have been recently formed to do something about the «problem» of population growth and their solutions range from contraception for minors to abortion on demand. An entire new literature has been born which capitalizes on the fears of overpopulation, and authors such as Paul and Anne Ehrlich, Garrett Hardin and Dennis Meadows have established international reputations through their books and research on the «problem»<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, organizations such as Zero Population Growth,

1. See Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968); Paul and Anne Ehrlich, *Population, Resources and Environment* (San Francisco: Freeman Press,



Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and the Population Crisis Committee have sought to alert the masses of American society to the population explosion. Even the popular press has become interested in controlling the Problem», and columnists such as Joyce Brothers who traditionally have given psychological counsel to those seeking it now offer advice which they feel will help solve America's population explosion<sup>2</sup>.

Such then could be characterized as the mood of a large portion of the population of the United States. Everywhere they turn they are besieged with the argument that both America and the world are on a suicidal path unless they drastically control future population growth. Is it no wonder that, confronted by such a deluge of «evidence», few individuals question the basic hypothesis of a validity of population crisis?

In this analysis the authors wish to challenge the assumption of such a population explosion in the United States. In so doing we realize that such a stance puts us among a distinct minority of American social scientists, yet this is a risk willingly taken. Our intention is to keep open the debate as to the existence of a population crisis and we believe that compelling evidence exists which suggests that the advocates of population catastrophe are mistaken in their analyses. This might be demonstrated by first analyzing the historical trends and secular decline in America's fertility patterns.

Perhaps the most striking feature of historical demographic trends is the rather pronounced decline in the U.S. fertility rate since 1800 (see Table 1). The data in Table 1 clearly demonstrate that there has been a continual historical process of fertility decline throughout American history. The only exception is the 1946-57 era which refers to the post World War II baby boom, wherein there was a pronounced fertility rate increase. This increase can be noted in the 1960 figure which is larger than the 1940 pre-baby boom one. These data then illustrate the secular decline in fertility rates over the span of 170 years and suggest that

1970); Garrett Hardin, ed., *Population, Evolution and Birth Control: A Collage of Controversial Ideas* (San Francisco: Freeman Press, 1969); Dennis Meadows, Donella Meadows, Jorgen Rander and William Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth* (Washington, D. C.: Universe Books, 1972).

2. Joyce Brothers, *Good Housekeeping*, September 1973, pp. 78ff. Brothers responded in the following way to the question of how many children the inquirer should have: «The threat of overpopulation continues to be a worldwide problem. If you are sure that you and your husband could enthusiastically care for more than two, a larger family may be right for you. But why not consider adopting an unwanted child?... By adoption you could have the large family you want and at the same time have the satisfaction of knowing that you are contributing to the solution of a serious problem.»



American society has slowly moved from a pattern of large completed families to smaller completed families.

The data presented in Table 2 illustrate the more recent trends in the birth rate of the United States. The present birth rate is the lowest in American history, surpassing the former record low years of 1933 and 1936. As the table shows, present birth rates have been steadily de-

TABLE 1

Total Fertility Rate of American Women 1800-1974 \*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Rate</i>
1800	7.04
1820	6.73
1840	6.14
1860	5.21
1880	4.24
1900	3.56
1920	3.17
1940	2.19
1960	3.52
1970	2.14
1974	1.90

TABLE 2

Crude Birth Rates for the United States for Selected Years\*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Crude Birth Rate</i>
1933	18.4
1936	18.4
1948	25.2
1949	25.1
1957	25.3
1961	23.5
1962	22.6
1963	21.9
1964	21.2
1965	19.6
1966	18.5
1967	17.9
1968	17.6
1969	17.8
1970	18.3
1971	18.1
1972	16.4
1973	15.0

\* Source: United States Bureau of the Census.



creasing since the height of the baby boom (1956-57) and overall decrease has been rather steep (25.3 to 15.0). It should be added that the present fertility rate is virtually at the replacement level and consequently the possibility of stable, or even negative, growth presents itself<sup>3</sup>.

These data help explain the concern of the advocates of population crisis, for if the 1957 rate (25.3) had been continued till the year 2000, the population of the United States would be approximately 400 million people. V. Dillon writes «It is this projection to which Americans are reacting today. What they haven't yet realized is that a decline since 1957 brought birth rates to their lowest point in American history»<sup>4</sup>. It should also be noted that many of the advocates of demographic crisis have chosen years of high fertility from which they then project future populations. Obviously, this inflates future projections.

Even more important, the recent declines in the United States birth rate within the past seven years have resulted in the Census Bureau drastically lowering its estimates of the population size for the year 2000<sup>5</sup>. As late as 1967, it projected 350 million; its present forecast is approximately 260-280 million<sup>6</sup>. These aggregate numbers indicate that the present population growth over the next generation will be at a manageable level.

Analyzing these data more closely, it should be noted that there is general acceptance within demographic circles of the position that the levels of fertility among various socio-economic groups in American society are converging, particularly in view of the noticeable declines in the fertility patterns of the lower socioeconomic groups. This decline in the fertility of the lower class, in addition to the slight rise in the fertility of the higher socioeconomic groups, has had the impact of considerably narrowing the historical social class fertility differentials<sup>7</sup>.

3. The fertility rate necessary for replacement (or zero population growth) is 2.14. As of March 1974, the rate was 1.90. The total fertility rate is equal to the total number of children born, divided by the number of women between the ages 15 and 44.

4. Valerie V. Dillon, «Will the Real Population Problem Please Stand Up?» East Brunswick, New Jersey: Family Life Bureau, Diocese of Trenton, 1972, p. 4. The present 1974 population of the United States is approximately 215 million—a long way from the projected 400 million.

5. Crude birth rate is equal to the number of births in a given year divided by the mid-year population with the result multiplied by 1000.

6. See «Projections of the Population of the United States by Age and Sex: 1970-2020», U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. The above figures were extrapolated from Series E (2.1 children per woman) from census data reported in MORE: *The Interfaces Between Population Economic Growth and the Environment*. Washington, D.C.: The League of Women Voters, 1972, p. 8.

7. Judah Matras, *Populations and Societies* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1973), p. 323.



The racial differences in American fertility patterns are also converging. Currently black rates are higher than white rates, but these differences may be spurious, if one controls for level of education. Thus, black fertility is greatest among women with low levels of education, far more so than white women in the same category. Black and white women with high school education have about the same level of fertility. However, the fertility of black female college graduates is far lower than that of white female graduates (1.4 mean children vs. 2.1 children for white females)<sup>8</sup>.

How are these decreasing levels of fertility in our population explained? Firstly, analyzing census data it can be noted that a far larger proportion of the female population is remaining single than in previous eras. In 1970, 44 % of women age 21 were single compared with 33 % in 1960. Even more significant is the proportion of college educated women who never marry which, at present, is approximately 19 %. Also of importance is the later age of marriage for American females and recent information from the United States Census Bureau suggests not only that an increasing number of American women will remain single, but that the remainder will marry at later ages than earlier age cohorts<sup>9</sup>. In discussing this «fertility recession» the well known social demographer Donald Bogue, has said he «finds it impossible to foresee a chain of developments other than the slow but steady decline of birth rates»<sup>10</sup>.

Of equal importance is the number of American women favoring large families and the data in Table 3 confirms that this number has dropped

TABLE 3

Age Distribution of Women Sampled Who Wanted Four or More Children, 1967 and 1971 \*

<u>Age Group</u>	<u>1967</u>	<u>1971</u>
a) 21-29 years old	34 %	15 %
b) 30-49 years old	40 %	24 %
c) 50 +	42 %	27 %
d) TOTAL	40 %	23 %

\* Source: Gallup Poll 1971; cited in V. Dillon, «Will the Real Population Problem Please Stand Up?» East Brunswick, N.J.: Bureau of Family Life, 1972, p. 4.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 325.

9. «The Panic as You Approach Zero», *New York Times*, June 4, 1972, p. 12.

10. «Birth Rate Declines Here, Reversing a 3-Year Trend», *New York Times*, Oct. 3, 1971, col. 6, p. 78.



considerably since 1967. The fertility decline is thus supported by the attitudinal expectations of American women.

Consequently, the combination of these factors —more women in the labor force, more women remaining single, or marrying at later ages, the growing number of women favoring smaller-sized families— suggest that American society is nowhere near the demographic apocalypse portrayed by numerous, respected publicists. In view of these factors, Malthusian brinkmanship thinking can not be validated by current data<sup>11</sup>.

This decrease in fertility, if sustained, will have a profound impact on America's population, particularly in the dependent age categories (under 15 and over 65). Firstly, the United States will have proportionally fewer children than in earlier eras. In 1970, for example, there were 15 % fewer children than in 1960 in the 5 and under age category, and this trend will be accentuated in future years. Secondly the fertility decline implies a higher median age for the population; in 1972 it was 28 and this will rise to 38 if the present birth rate is sustained in future years. This consequently means that the death rate, which is now 9.6 per 1000, will rise substantially, since the higher ages have higher mortality rates than the lower ones. Thirdly, by 1980 the United States can expect approximately 18 % more people in the 65 + age category. Fourthly, in relation to the central cities within metropolitan areas, each can be expected to have lower absolute populations in 1980 than in 1970 because of declining fertility rates among the racial and ethnic minorities, and because of high out-migration to the suburban rings.

In spite of these factors, critics constantly argue that the United States is still overpopulated and that the decline in the current birth rate is of minor importance. Rather Americans should be concerned with such factors as the future food production of America, the high density so evident in the nation, the industrial pollution created by large populations, etc. Again, it can be argued that these are invalid arguments. Firstly, America's capacity to feed its existing population can not be seriously questioned. Until very recently there was a food surplus, the value of which was \$12 billion; we have paid farmers \$4 billion each year *not* to grow food! The real problem here is not food production, but its distribution wherein means must be developed to channel surplus food to those in the population who need it (inner city residents, the

11. An interesting sidelight is that the national membership of Zero Population Growth (Z.P.G.) has dropped from 30,000 in 1972 to 21,000 in 1973: «Birth Rate: Each Change...», col. 2, p. 9.



aged, rural poor, etc.)<sup>12</sup>. The noted economist, Colin Clark, says that the U.S. population could continue to increase at its present rate until 2000 A.D. and still have large food surpluses.

Secondly, the nation is far from overpopulated in relation to its land area. Table 4 compares America with other countries. Again the problem is one of distribution since 80 % of the people live on 10 % of the land, 70 % of it on 2 % of the land! A review of the data in Table 5 shows the growth and change in America's population distribution since 1950. The data indicate that most of the recent population growth in the U.S. metropolitan areas has taken place in what sociologists call the urban «fringe». In fact, since 1960 the population of central cities grew by six percent, while the contiguous areas within metropolitan areas (SMSA) grew by 27 percent! In addition, if this trend of concentration and centralization continues, 50 % of the nation's population will live in one or the other of two huge urban regions (one is the area encompassing the region from Boston to Washington which will join the area running from Chicago to Pittsburgh; the second, on the west coast of the United States will include the area between San Francisco and San Diego, California)<sup>13</sup>. Hence, the need for de-centralization of these huge metropolitan areas

TABLE 4  
Population Density of Selected Nations \*

<u>Nation</u>	<u>Persons Per Square Mile</u>
Netherlands	985
Japan	710
West Germany	627
United Kingdom	590
Italy	455
India	416
France	237
China (mainland)	198
Indonesia	197
Greece	174
United States	57
U.S.S.R.	29

\* Source: United States Bureau of Census, cited in MORE: *The Interfaces Between Population, Economic Growth and the Environment*. Washington, D.C.: League of Women Voters, 1972, p. 15.

12. Dillon, *op. cit.*

13. More, *op. cit.*, p. 12.



T A B L E 5

Growth of the Suburban, Central City and  
Non-metropolitan Population of the United States  
1950 - 1970

AREA CATEGORY	RESIDENT POPULATION as of APRIL 1, 1970					Percent of total
	Total in Thousands			Change in Thousands		
	1950	1960	1970	1950-60	1960-70	
243 SMSAs	94,600	119,600	139,400	25,000	19,800	68.6
central cities	53,800	60,000	63,800	6,100	3,900	31.4
outside central cities	40,800	59,600	75,600	18,900	15,900	37.2
urban	n.a.	43,000	59,200	n.a.	16,200	29.1
rural	n.a.	16,700	16,400	n.a.	300	8.1
Nonmetropolitan areas	56,700	59,700	63,800	3,000	4,100	31.4
urban	n.a.	22,300	26,400	n.a.	4,000	13.0
rural	n.a.	37,400	37,400	n.a.	50	18.4

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Pocket Data Book, Table7, p. 40.





is apparent. For those living in these areas, it is understandable to see why they consider the United States to be one of the most densely populated areas on earth! The population density of New York's Manhattan Island, for example, in 1960, exceeded 68,000 persons per square mile<sup>14</sup>. Bogue has argued that the population of America could easily double and it would help immensely if these metropolitan areas were more decentralized.

Thirdly, the relationship between population growth and pollution is complex since the American life style presupposes that a value on material consumption and the resultant problems of this choice can not be simply blamed on population growth. It's just as logical to argue that the amount of pollution can be better reduced by *lower* material consumption on the part of the nation than by *lower* fertility! Conrad Tauber, former associate director of the U.S. Census Bureau, has stated this in the following way:

The recent public concern with environmental problems has often confused the element of population growth with the consequence of the way in which we live. Economic and social factors are more important than population growth in threatening the quality of American life<sup>15</sup>.

Also, the apocalyptic writers often equate lower population size with economic growth in the nation. Perhaps the opinion of the French demographer Sauvy might be useful in this respect for he argues that if limiting population growth enriches a country then France should be the richest on earth, since it attained population control long before the other industrialized nations!

Hence, the arguments that the United States risks chaos because of overcrowding, dwindling food potential, and irreversible atmospheric pollution, etc. can not be supported since the empirical data suggest otherwise. Yet why do these arguments constantly arise in discussions of population phenomenon? Why then do the advocates of population control, whether it be via contraception, sterilization, abortion or euthanasia, ignore the data which suggests that the United States can accommodate increased population growth? Why are alternatives such as redistribution of population through in-migration, greater decentralization of

14. Matras, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

15. Conrad Tauber, cited in *MORE: The Interfaces...*, p. 20.



urban centers, more equitable distribution of wealth and natural resources, etc. ignored?

These questions must largely remain unanswered, but it might be hypothesized that the Malthusian underpinnings of the crisis position comes closest to a reasonable answer. Malthus, writing in 1798, reasoned that in human society two indisputable variables were operant: food increases in an arithmetic ratio (e.g., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) while population increases in a geometric ratio (e.g., 1, 2, 4, 8, 16). Hence while the number of mouths grows geometrically, cultivable land grows only arithmetically. The result is inevitable and logical: the number of people is bound to outstrip the amount of food in a given population.

Yet even though Malthus' theory has been demonstrated to be incorrect — primarily because the pace of urbanization and industrialization since 1798 have circumvented his paradox—it still remains extremely powerful in the United States. Americans, just as did Malthus, tend to see the source of all human poverty and misery in individual inadequacies. Hence, the problems which beset American society—whether they be crime, alienation, or poverty—are incorrectly associated with population growth. If only the individual would control the size of his progeny, *then* society would see the slow dissolution of its problems—so say the neo-Malthusians. Their pessimism is always associated with a profound sense of utopian idealism! Hence, solutions must always be personal and for this reason neo-Malthusians have a great deal of difficulty in examining other positions on population questions. Neo-Malthusians can not understand these other stances since they are unable to break away from the land-people ratio relationship inherent in Malthus' argument.

Consequently, in the United States the advocates of population explosion operate not only in a factual vacuum, but in an ideological one as well. It is no wonder then that their arguments and policies become so emotional, so vitriolic, so unrelated to the actual cause of human events in contemporary American life. In this sense their position is mythical, full of sound and fury, yet signifying nothing.



# resumen

---

Desde hace unos años, el público norteamericano está sometido a un verdadero bombardeo propagandista de argumentos antinatalistas, llamamientos emocionales y «slogans» publicitarios sobre el llamado «problema» del crecimiento demográfico en Estados Unidos. Al mismo tiempo, numerosos «expertos» y muchas organizaciones sociales intentan buscar «soluciones» a ese «problema», para evitar una catástrofe demográfica en el futuro. Estas «soluciones» muchas veces son radicales y carecen de realismo, desde los contraceptivos para los menores de edad hasta el aborto generalizado para todos.

En este artículo los autores demuestran, científicamente, la falacia de los planteamientos apocalípticos y antinatalistas en cuanto al caso de Estados Unidos. Lo más importante en la historia demográfica de este país es el hecho de que las tasas de fertilidad han ido bajando de forma drástica desde 1800; en la actualidad, la tasa de natalidad está a nivel de reemplazo, y los pronósticos de cara al futuro inmediato indican que el proceso de declive va a continuar. Este fenómeno se debe a una combinación de factores —un mayor número de mujeres solteras, incorporadas en el trabajo profesional; un incremento de matrimonios tardíos; el cambio de mentalidad con respecto a las familias numerosas— que hacen suponer que la sociedad norteamericana *no* camina hacia el desastre demográfico, sino hacia un *vacío demográfico*. Además, el argumento malthusiano *no* corresponde a la realidad, y no encuentra apoyo estadísticamente.

El impacto del descenso continuo de la fertilidad se sentirá en el futuro no lejano de forma muy negativa, especialmente en las categorías de edad dependientes (menos de 15 y más de 65 años de edad), y llevará consigo problemas socioeconómicos y demográficos graves. Por otra parte, los argumentos sobre la escasez de alimentos, las altas densidades de población, la contaminación del medio ambiente, etc., carecen de validez científica y de realismo. Por lo tanto, en Estados Unidos, los abogados de la «explosión demográfica» actúan no sólo en un vacío factual, sino también en un vacío intelectual. Sus argumentos, aunque estén cargados de ruido y de emoción, carecen de sentido común y por tanto defienden una posición mítica.