

Population and Consumption

Two contrasting approaches

Book Review by John F. Rohe

First Worlders identify burgeoning population pressures as a major threat to their successors. Third Worlders, on the other hand, identify the threat as excessive consumption in other places having replacement level fertility.

Who is right?

Both are.

Two forces are conspiring against our successors. Residents of a finite planet having a net daily population gain of 250,000 people (total births minus total deaths) engages in self-deception if they believe the fearsome demographic trend can continue indefinitely. The drive toward immediate self-indulgence, promoted by consumerism in a shopping culture, also bears the seeds of self-destruction. Possessed by our possessions, we drift from traditional notions of the common good into a realm of aggressive resource depletion.

Ending the Explosion and *An Agenda for Sustainability* are two recently published books addressing the parallel threats of population and consumption, respectively, and both books set forth plans for action.

In *Ending the Explosion*, Hollingsworth capably outlines the current demographic drama. Although the rate of population growth is declining, the number of people is still growing at a

frightful rate. During the population conference at Cairo, Egypt in September, 1995, the world population was 5.6 billion. By 2100, it will swell to 12 to 17 billion. To place this in perspective, an increase of just 2 billion persons would equal the world's entire human population as of 1930. If fertility holds constant at 1990 levels, the world population in 2100 could be over 100 billion.

Populations have a certain "demographic momentum." A high proportion of young people reside in nations with high fertility rates. As these young move through their fertile years, they will assure a growing population for decades. So even if the high fertility nation immediately implements a plan for only two offspring for every couple, the population will still surge for decades to come.

Hollingsworth also illuminates the debate between those clinging to the romantic mystique of the frontier and others willing to acknowledge the existence of limits. On the one hand, he finds utopians relying on an ever-expanding resource base and limitless human ingenuity driving the forces of consumption. On the other hand, he observes the sobering reality of deforestation, wetland destruction, species extinction, desertification, soil erosion, ground water depletion, carbon dioxide buildup, ozone depletion, massive population growth, widespread malnutrition and other scarcities.

Hollingsworth posits the following: "Unless humanity wishes to forfeit any good chance of humanely limiting itself to eight or nine billion persons, the time for nations to act in earnest is now."

Hollingsworth's plan for responding to population concerns is sensitive to the differing cultural, social, political and human pressures driving this juggernaut. He sets forth a compelling case for

An Agenda for Sustainability: Fairness in a World of Limits

by William M. Bueler
Cross Cultural Publications, 1997
(1-800-561-6526)
136 pages, \$15.95



Ending the Explosion: Population Policies and Ethics for a Humane Future

by William G. Hollingsworth
Seven Locks Press, 1996
254 pages, \$17.95
(Available from the Social Contract Press,
1-800-352-4843)

John F. Rohe, an attorney in Petoskey, Michigan with a longstanding interest in environmental concerns, is the author of *A Bicentennial Malthusian Essay: Conservation, Population and the Indifference to Limits*. Copies may be ordered from *The Social Contract Press*, 1-800-352-4843.

seriously responding to the population crisis, yet his book clearly urges the avoidance of any coercive action in reproductive choice: “governments will need to be especially careful not to pose coercive reproductive choices to impoverished persons.”

So just what is coercive? Hollingsworth explains: “Though the resulting deprivation may fall far short of intolerable, if it is closer thereto than to inconsequential, the antinatalist incentive deserves to be deemed coercive. Similarly, though the deprivation may be more than trivial, if it is closer to zero than to intolerably heavy, the incentive should — as to reproductive freedom — be deemed non-coercive.”

Hollingsworth seems to suggest reproductive incentives not cross the midpoint on a spectrum between coercive and non-coercive. His fine distinction might be hard to follow in actual practice. Coercion may be a successful tool in some circumstances, such as China, but not in others. Furthermore, how does one meaningfully draw a distinction between non-coercive tax incentives (which might impose a lasting hardship on a large family) from short-term coercive incentives?

Hollingsworth might also consider adopting a more cynical approach to his choice of terms. For example, the “antinatalists” are generally the good guys in his book. It may be more endearing to be for something than against something else. Why not label the good guys as “pro-stability” advocates, or the “pro-sustainability” enthusiasts?

In *An Agenda for Sustainability*, William M. Bueler observes that the present economic system does not consider itself “healthy” unless it is engaged in perpetual growth. Consumption is an “inherent aspect of this growth.” The “American Dream” in our “modern, mobile, media-saturated” democratic society suggests it is easily attainable by all. Under the present economic reality, economic disparity is widening. According to the Congressional Budget Office, during the 1980s, households in the top one percent saw a one hundred percent real income increase, while the bottom twenty percent declined six percent. Those

in the middle stayed even, but only because more spouses were employed outside the home. In 1960, top executives in the United States earned forty-three times as much as their average workers, but in 1990, their incomes were one hundred times higher. A comparable Japanese competitor earns seventeen times as much as his average worker.

In an effort to lift the bottom, the prevalent response calls for more “growth.” This should mean higher incomes, a more responsible citizenry and a greater stake in the democratic union. It is Reagan’s “trickle down theory.” Growth, however, has not furthered these goals. Instead, it has widened the disparity and the ecological consequences of growth

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are all too evident.

Bueler has a vision to pave a path to a more sustainable future. Some of his measures will seem harsh, and will break precedent. His remedies are well-conceived, yet they are not likely to attain a level of acceptability unless we are willing to concede our present path is unsustainable, foolhardy and hazardous. Accordingly, he must first assail the unexamined conviction that growth should be an end in itself. In the words of Edward Abbey, “growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of a cancer cell.”

A sustainable society, in Bueler’s view, will maintain a safe and clean environment, will not be over-populated, will provide equal opportunity, will be economically prosperous, will place a decent life for all above extravagance for some, will be intellectually and culturally free and dynamic, will encourage and reward moral and responsible behavior, and will encourage political participation of all. Mobilizing a sufficient political will requires us to challenge the consummate addiction to growth.

After identifying the finitude of natural resources, and the strains we have imposed on our growth-oriented economic system, Bueler next identifies values, such as thrift, moderation and restraint as essential to the transition toward a sustainable state. He points out that “the mere existence of extreme wealth and extravagance at the top of the society legitimizes the pursuit of ever

greater wealth and consumption by the entire society.” He sets forth a compelling case for limiting wealth and narrowing the range of incomes.

Profit motives in a capitalistic economy will continue to be the primary means to increase productivity and efficiency; however these incentives cannot achieve resource conservation and environmental protection. Although the public sector cannot create social and moral values for ecological and political sustainability, it can assure universal education, crime protection, medical care and a safety net for the needy. Bigger government will not necessarily be needed to assure a decent life, but government must become more resistant to political pressures of special interests running against the common good.

The public sector should establish ecological parameters (as to resources and environment) within which a free economy will operate. It should have the power to prevent excessive consumption of scarce resources. It must have the ability to demand reimbursement of real environmental costs of production. He proposes a “resource-use tax” and “pollution fees.”

Since the imposition on our carrying capacity is determined by per capita consumption multiplied by the total number of people, Bueller also emphasizes the importance of a population policy.

His agenda primarily focuses upon narrowing the range of incomes to attain a level of sustainability. This requires steeply progressive taxes on higher incomes. He claims the “best way” to provide adequate incomes to all is to provide for a highly

educated skilled work force in a non-growing population with a high demand for labor.

In closing, he cites policies that have been developed through a heightened self-interest, values based on sustainability and sufficient political will. Economic growth has not led to an improved lifestyle for all, but only for the few. It's time to build a better future based upon values and policies emerging from a recognition of limits.

The challenges in formulating an agenda for sustainable populations and economics will likely consume much of the intellectual capital in this nation for decades to come. The political will, community acceptance and degree of coercion will be influenced by our perception of limits. As we

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approach the bicentennial of the *Essay on the Principles of Population* by Thomas Robert Malthus, it might be an opportune time to sharpen our numeric skills. **TSC**