Population Competition:
Not safety, but folly in numbers

A Book Review/Essay by David Simcox

Humanity has long had a mostly irrational and at times fatal attraction to increasing its numbers, an attraction that is too often blind to limits of resources, space, and the exigencies of an adequate quality of life. Human communities, whether tribes, nations, ethnicities, religions or political parties, find their validation and their safety in growth of their numbers — and in the decline of the numbers of their rivals.

"Number power," as Jack Parsons terms it, has historically been humanity's golden counter of status in intergroup and interstate relations. Humanity's pernicious addiction to number power fuels the seductive strategy of population competition, and its supporting tactic of competitive breeding. For Parsons, as for any thinking person, these urges have become supremely destructive forces for the planet and its nations, including our own, that must ultimately balance population and finite resources.

Human Population Competition: A Study of the Pursuit of Power Through Numbers
by Jack Parsons
New York: Edwin Mellen Press
803 pages, $225.00

Parsons amply documents how human groups embrace numbers as the great elixir that guarantees success in the quest for military power, political influence, economic prosperity, and just plain prestige and validation. While his arguments against this mind-set are familiar, he asserts them boldly and trenchantly. The unending drive of western societies for bigger numbers to spur the economy, Parsons says, is a form of modern-day "mercantilism," a discredited economic theory summarized in the words of a 17th century French civil servant, "subjects and cattle must be multiplied"

Today's cornucopians have their roots in such outdated thought: "if population is the main resource, as Julian Simon argued, the more there are of us, the bigger the resource base, and the better off we all must be." Parsons sees the triumphs in science, economics and world-transforming inventions of tiny Scotland as just one of a number of historical refutations that teeming masses are necessary to produce an abundance of genius.

Parsons contends that increases in *quantity* of humans — whether for military service, as workers, or as consumers — inevitably involves a trade off on *quality*. Quality versus quantity and the overlooked opportunity costs of having more people are central to the Parsonian thesis: More soldiers, but more poorly trained and armed; More workers, but with less training and capital to back them up; More consumers, but each with less to spend and more demands for public support; More taxpayers, but each with less ability to pay and more needs.

The Variety of Human Reproduction Outlooks

The book's title does not do justice to the amplitude of Parsons' interests. This ambitious book is also about the human population's competition with its own environment and with the planet's other life forms. It discusses the centrality of population competition in natural selection — humans not excluded. It has a great deal to say, however episodically, about the anthropology, biology and ideology of human reproduction, citing such obscure cultures such as the Inuit, the Kalahari desert people, and the ancient Babylonians. Did you know, for example, that the Kalahari men contracept by diverting their semen through a puncture at the base of the penis?

These two volumes abound with historical and mythological examples of man's innate drive for number power, as well as his recognition limits. In Genesis, the

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most seductive promise Yahweh can give to Abraham is to make his progeny as numerous as the stars. The comfortably atheistic Parsons notes dourly that most aspects of modern religions' attitudes toward sex, births and population appear to stem from "ancient, mindless and dysfunctional roots" such as these. Yet he points out that pronatalism seemingly inherent in Christianity did not emerge until the era of Thomas Aquinas. Such early Christian thinkers as Tertullian were proto-Malthusians.

The millions who see "increase and multiply" as an unending mandate, Parsons stresses, ignore the numerous biblical passages that are antinatalist. In the rush to create more people for God and His true faiths, for the labor market, for the vast consumer bazaar, for superior military forces, and for national, regional and local prestige, the bible's realism about ecology and demography is generally ignored.

The Two Faces of Population Competition: Increase Your Own or Decrease Your Rival's

Population competition, the author reminds us, is not just about having more people of the right kind. It is at its deadliest when it strives to have fewer people of the wrong kind, driving out or slowing the growth of unwanted populations. Competitive breeding is an expression of population competition that takes the form of either offensive or defensive pronatalism. While Parsons is a materialist thinker, he is also an ethicist. He values human rights and human dignity, both of which he fears are grievously threatened by population competition.

The actions of population competitors to slow the growth or reduce the numbers of rival groups, he warns, lead to such extremes as: genocide (Armenians, Jews, Cambodians); expulsion (Kosovars, then Serbs, in Kosovo or French Acadians in British North America); immigration restrictions, including total prohibition of the immigration of unwanted populations, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and later the U.S. "Asian barred zone"; stimulated emigration (such as the "return" to Africa of freed US slaves); and eugenics, such as sterilization or stimulated contraception in unwanted populations.

Population competition is commonplace and ongoing. The most virulent cases now occur within less developed nations: Kosovo, East Timor, Rwanda, Burundi, Indonesia and Sudan. But western nations are not always above pressuring unwanted populations to fade away. European states still have subtle ways of encouraging their Gypsies ("Roma") to move on or use trade and aid concessions to get foreign minorities to stay home. Parsons regards the U.S. removal of more than one million Mexican illegal aliens annually as an ongoing expulsion, though an argument can be made that the term more properly applies to removal of established populations.

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Population Competition for Economic Growth and Prestige

Even more destructive for resources and the environment, and only sketchily addressed by Parsons, is the relentless population competition fostered by regional and local boosterism. Population growth remains the ultimate marker of success for most First World cities and states. Chronically depressed Detroit's great boast now is that its four-decade population decline has now reversed. Metropolitan areas in the United States consistently measure their population "progress" against competing cities of similar size.

Sizable and well-funded state and local bureaucracies exist to promote investment for "jobs," even if local labor is not there to fill them. Then those same bureaucracies, seek new sources of national and even international migrants to fill the new jobs. Iowa is embarrassed, not gratified, by its status as a near zero population growth state. Officials rejoiced that settlement of 15,000 foreign immigrants in 1998 had more than offset the out migration of 10,000 Iowans. Lt. Governor Sally Pederson in 1999 trumpeted the state's campaign to attract immigrants, including a one-stop assistance center and financial incentives. This sort of growth mania of localities and regions profoundly affects attitudes in Congress and the executive toward further expansion of immigration and the rigor of enforcement of existing immigration laws.

Warring Instincts on Reproduction

The author describes an important human paradox: the competing imperatives in all of us on one hand to reproduce prolifically, and on the other to prudently limit our progeny to match available resources. Traditional societies have accepted this imperative of balance most readily. Parsons finds third world nations more realistic about the links among population, resources and quality of life than are the "advanced" industrial countries. They openly acknowledge that population growth is a problem and create programs and policies to slow it down.

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With exasperation, the author finds most developing countries lost in a "great fog of macro-irrationality," convinced that we can grow forever, or if not, some solution with turn up. Parsons sees the advanced nations, not the less developed, as the ones who believe in "cargo cult economics."

These two volumes do not want for historical and mythological examples of man's innate drive for number power, as well as his recognition of limits. Parsons is deft at producing the illustrative quotation from even the obscure corners of human thought. In Genesis, the most seductive promise Yahweh can give to Abraham is to make his progeny as numerous as the stars. The comfortably atheistic Parsons notes dourly that most aspects of modern religion attitudes toward sex, births and population appear to stem from "ancient, mindless and dysfunctional roots" such as these. Yet he points out that pronatalism seemingly inherent in Christianity did not emerge until the era of Thomas Aquinas. Such early Christian thinkers as Tertullian were proto-Malthusians.

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Third World Realism and First World Pro-populationism

Virtually all societies have had practices for keeping their numbers down to some notion of the right size. An earthy African blessing captures both the joys and dangers of reproduction: "May you have children . . . until their excrement buries you up to the neck." Parsons tells us that it is the shifting balance between these two human drives, shaped by a host of different influences, that largely determines the flow of births in a particular region at a particular time. Unfortunately, this reductionist approach could be applied to nearly all the choices made by human beings. The devil is in the details of the "different influences."

Jack Parsons is at his most acerbic in exposing how governments, and private institutions in the West "avoid, deny, distort, or even invent, demographic" evidence to sidestep awkward facts. In pulling this off, elites of Western nations are aided by a good deal of irrationality, innumeracy, contradiction and denial among their own populations.

The media, for example, which comes in for special blame, "doesn't seem to know or care about the difference between a million and a billion, between a birthrate and a growth rate, or between a percentage and absolute increase." Some examples of demographic "howlers" he picks up from people who should know better are:

- A 1994 reference by a presumed expert to the "94 million" babies born on earth that year, missing by a mile the 142 million actually born;
- solemn references to "negative birth rates" in such places as Italy, from which Parsons infers that "more babies than had been born disappeared back into Italian wombs!"
- a noted journalist's comparison of a 2.4 percent annual population growth rate (a doubling time of less than 30 years) with prevailing interest rates and dismissing it as a "mere bagatelle."

Cooking the Books on Numbers: 'Demosophistry'

"Demosophistry" is a Parsonian term for manipulative cooking of the books on numbers and peoples, such as the careful undercounting of immigration in western countries. Demosophistry is at work when the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) reported in 1999 about 650,000 immigrants to the United States in 1998. The one-third drop below the most likely number was made possible by a convenient technicality. INS had simply not been able to do the paper work on a few hundred thousand more newly admitted settlers. Neither does INS's annual "official number" ever include the nearly 300,000 additional illegal immigrants. It is the fallacious and more benign 650,000 number that becomes the center of the national debate. And those who claim higher number become alarmists, or worse.

A distorted sense of ethics deserves some blame in avoiding unwelcome numbers, he claims, muddying and stifling the debate. Somehow it has become out of bounds — even irreverent — to talk about numbers of human beings in discussions of public policy. Here are some of the demosophistries faced by advocates of "equinatalism," as Parsons terms those who believe in balancing births and resources, when they try to talk about numbers. 1) Numbers do not matter, so they don't need to be discussed; 2) Numbers matter so much that they must not be discussed lest we offend and stir up strife; and 3) The mere idea of applying numbers to people is in itself anathema.

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Conclusion: Why Do Some Groups *Not* Breed Competitively?

We know population competition when we see it. But evidence of competitive breeding is more elusive. Parsons makes a good theoretical case that competitive breeding occurs. But his work offers little empirical data establishing the fact or the importance of the competitive drive in birth decisions in different societies. Does such data even exist? If there are systematic surveys of reproduction motives in high fertility societies that buttress his theory, he does not mention them. Indeed, even if surveyed, would an expectant mother and father in a high-fertility environment be aware of a competitive urge as a factor among the many in their reproductive choices. And if so, how much weight would they would give it?

This reviewer is left wondering what the mechanism is by which the perception of threat or opportunity is instilled into the population of childbearing age and into their reproductive decisions? Is it a top-down process mediated by government and other institutions of social control? The record of recent history fails to show a close association in the West between fertility and the intensity of pronatalist exhortations by religious, business and political leaders?

Or is the commitment to competitive breeding a bottom-up phenomenon, a response of families to their own perceptions of the hostility or benignity of their environment? If fertility decisions, influenced by so many interacting factors as Parsons notes, how do we isolate and quantify competitive intent?

More ethnographic studies are needed in high fertility regions where competitive breeding is suspected or might be expected: Palestinian Arabs, Hispanics in the United States, Kosovars, Lebanese Christians and among what Parsons calls "the double minority" in Northern Ireland: Catholics who chafe under their minority status within Ulster, and Ulster Protestants, who see themselves as a threatened minority within greater Ireland.

A better question might be: why don't we see even more indications of competitive breeding? Why don't we see it in many groups where you would reasonably expect it — groups that are politically or economically oppressed by regimes controlled by different ethnic groups, facing declining population shares, or isolated and outnumbered within a polity that is perceived as hostile?

The number of groups in the world who would appear to have reasons to breed competitively is considerable, if one counts both groups that are, or see themselves as, endangered minorities, and groups that might fear, justifiably or not, that their majority status is waning, such as non-Hispanic European-Americans. In California, where minority status looms for non-Hispanic whites, their unease has been forcefully expressed at the ballot box, but not in the bedroom.

Similarly, what can explain the clear failures of overtly sanctioned and subsidized competitive breeding, such as among whites in Apartheid South Africa, to make any significant demographic difference? What explains the demographic behavior of the Québécois, who had among the highest fertilities in the Western Hemisphere in the first half of the 20th century, but have let their fertility fall to among the lowest since then, even as Quebec's nationalism and sense of isolation within the Canadian union has burgeoned?

The map abounds with societies seemingly ripe for competitive breeding. Polynesian Fijians in Fiji sought to violently reshape their political system rather than surrender power to a more fecund East Indian majority. Why has competitive breeding not been their strategy? Subjected for decades to a colonial power, Fijians had little voice in the 19th century policy of robust East Indian immigration. But "defensive pronatalism" was a tactic open to them and they did not adopt it?

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Similar questions might be asked about English-speaking Blacks in Trinidad, Guyana and Belize, who have lost or are losing their majority or plurality status to more fecund East Indians or Hispanics. The answer to this one should be of interest to immigration policy makers. The declining number-power of Blacks in those societies has been accompanied and reinforced by a strikingly high propensity to emigrate. What Parsons terms a "takeover" (demographic displacement) is occurring in textbook form in those societies, in turn generating high immigration to other nations.

Worth examining is whether there is a negative association between the education, secularism and modernity of a population and its propensity to breed competitively. Such populations are the most likely to have small families, the very condition that makes them poor contenders in the population competition and ultimately threatens them with the status of a shrinking and defensive minority. In short they are of the species the author calls "*homo contracipiens*," unwilling to change their ways and fated to be dominated and ultimately excluded by "*homo progenitivus*."

We Must Change Human Instincts — But How?

The remedy Parsons offers for humankind's addiction to numbers is hardly more unexceptionable than to work for a change in the hearts and minds of men. True, human irrationality and ignorance about numbers must be combated with rational dialog, education and persuasion through democratic processes. Parson's book stands as a major resource in this struggle. But the task seems even more arduous when we realize the irrationality and ignorance on population is often most entrenched among groups who now claim a monopoly on rationality and enlightenment, such as those Parsons labels our "Kamikaze liberals." TSC