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# Limiting Growth: Unheeded Prophecies

A Retrospective Double Review by Mark Wegierski

## POPULATION VERSUS LIBERTY

By Jack Parsons  
London: Pemberton Books, 1971  
417 pages, \$19.00

## POPULATION FALLACIES

By Jack Parsons  
London: Elek/Pemberton, 1977  
286 pages, \$19.00

Although these books were written roughly two decades ago, they contain interesting insights, and continue to seem quite fresh and breezy. Professor Jack Parsons, who is now happily retired in Wales, had a successful career in engineering before studying philosophy and politics at Keele as a Mature State Scholar. After getting his degree in 1955, he did research for London University and the National Coal Board. At the time of his first book he was a lecturer in Social Sciences at Brunel University. He also did a documentary about the effect on a small village of the closing of a mine, and was a long-time officer of the Conservation Society. At the time of the second book, he was a Senior Lecturer in Population Studies, and Deputy Director of the David Owen Centre for Population Growth Studies at University College, Cardiff.

*Population Versus Liberty* contains a fairly extensive bibliography (pp. 380-392), two appendices (pp. 393-395), a Name Index (pp. 397-403), a Subject Index (pp. 404-417), as well as numerous charts and tables, all these listed on pages ix-xii.

In the preface, Parsons succinctly states his thesis:

*The three basic points*

1. *The population explosion started over three centuries ago.*
2. *It presents a world problem and embraces Europe and the United Kingdom, both directly and indirectly.*
3. *It cannot possibly go on much longer because the Earth is finite.*

*The three basic questions*

1. *When will population be controlled?*
2. *By what means will it be controlled?*
3. *How much suffering will be involved in the control process? (p. xx)*

He then explicitly makes the connection between population control and liberty, the central point of his book:

*Population control is essential for the preservation of all that we hold most dear, including individual liberty, and I hope the facts and arguments put forward here add up to a satisfactory intellectual and moral basis for its acceptance by libertarians. In the final analysis there can be no question whether we have population control but only when and by what means (p. xxii).*

In Part One, "Freedom from Ignorance," Parsons asserts the legitimacy of demographic endeavor, but also states in Chapter 1, "A Cautionary Note", that "population can by no means be entrusted solely to the hands of demographers" (p. 6), as it is a pressing global issue. In Chapter 2, "The Arithmetic of Growth," Parsons strongly argues for the overwhelming power of the sexual and reproductive instinct, and that population growth, if unimpeded, would be geometric in pattern, citing the disturbing statistic that a four-child family would theoretically lead to 245,000 billion people by the 46th generation. Even a rate of 2.02 children per family (one-one-hundredth above replacement rate) originating in only *one* human family would eventually lead to stupendous growth. He then takes the reader into the actual population history of the world and the United Kingdom, showing that population growth on both the world and U.K. levels has indeed followed a geometric curve — that is, growing very slowly up until three centuries ago, and then shooting drastically upward. At the end of the section, Parsons states categorically "that an increase of only one ten thousandth of 1 per cent per annum is impossible [i.e. untenable to human existence] in the long run" (p. 62).

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In Part Two, "The Meaning of Liberty," Parsons

makes his contribution to a long-standing debate in a commonsense approach to true freedom consisting of a balancing of various "microfreedoms". He proposes the formula, "Liberty = Macrotfreedom = the Sum of all Microfreedoms" (p. 96). He also argues "that individual liberty is produced by social control" (p. 97), as only the social conditioning to respect the rights of others can make the working out of competing microfreedoms possible. In Chapter 7, "The Arithmetic of Liberty," Parsons argues that many of the most pressing social problems have their roots in excessive population, and that the more people there are, the more willed or unwilling cooperation there must be, because of increasing complexity. In Chapter 8, "The Law of Liberty," Parsons looks at possible precedents in British law that would lend themselves to effecting population control. In Chapter 9, "The Ecology of Liberty," he makes some interesting points about the need for personal living space and working space for the individual.

Part Three, "The Freedom Game," proposes a kind of simulation of the problems of an ever-increasing number of pieces occupying and trying to move through, the same, limited size checker-board. This is then related to the overall situation in the United Kingdom (with the area available per person rapidly shrinking); to "freedom of the road" — where traffic goes increasingly slower; and to "freedom to enjoy yourself" where the increasing stress on recreational facilities is shown through increasing numbers of recreational vehicles and sports and golf club memberships, as well as through some tragicomic news-stories about the overcrowding of recreational areas.

Part Four points out that people have "The Freedom to Choose" what kind of society they want to live in. Population growth at or below replacement level is certainly the best (Chapter 14, "Optimum Populations"). Virtually all primitive peoples have limited population in sometimes very brutal ways, and preventative controls are necessary today to prevent such drastic solutions later on (Chapter 15, "Population Policies"). Population control can work, and even small changes can bring great dividends (Chapter 16, "Freedom from Fatalism").

In the "Summary and Reflections," Parsons expresses the hope that an "era of self-control" is dawning, and wisely says that

*the great problem facing humanity ... is to evolve a philosophy of life which is expansionist with respect to every good thing in life (things which need not necessarily be reflected in the gross national product) while becoming restrictionist in those spheres where self-indulgence is becoming catastrophic (p. 376).*

*Population Fallacies*, although published in 1977, had largely been written before the earlier book,

but various unforeseen difficulties resulted in the delay. It contains a preface (pp. ix-x), some tables and charts throughout the text (listed on pp. xiii-xv), endnotes (pp. 253-262), a bibliography (pp. 263-271), a Name Index (pp. 272-274), and a Subject Index (pp. 275-286).

Part One, "A Recapitulation," restates the argument against considering population control as a violation of individual liberty.

In Part Two, Parsons examines numerous fallacies concerning population growth, and demolishes them one-by-one in workmanlike fashion, by straightforward logic and argument.

Among the fallacies: that statistics are generally unreliable; that future growth cannot be predicted; the now rather antiquated-sounding argument that large populations are needed for military strength; that persons from heavily populated regions can migrate to other countries or into outer space (Parsons is particularly good in showing that there are no empty places left anymore and that the outer space solution is wholly utopian); and that larger families are generally happier (in which he probably somewhat overdoes his anti-large-family position).

In Part Three, he argues against the 'scientific' fallacies of the biological growth curve and of a supposed population cycle. He makes a telling argument in this passage:

*Can any moral or rational creature — let alone one claiming a touch of divinity — deliberately opt out and allow the world population's growth-curve, or any other, to be flattened out by brutish natural processes rather than by sympathetic involvement, foresight, and applied intelligence?*

However, the population cycle he criticizes as flawed has indeed reached the predicted stage of population growth below replacement rate in the Western world today. This is a paradox that would confound Parsons (and Malthus) — the very wealthiest, best-educated, and most well-nourished people in the world today — rather than reproducing as much as they realistically can — in fact have the fewest children. The plethora of means of birth control available in the West must have something to do with this (as one suspects that there is *more* sexual activity — at least in certain circles — with *less* sexual reproduction — the state of what could be called "sterile promiscuity"). Other factors are undoubtedly the breakdown of the traditional family, the emergence of feminism, and the increased profile of homosexuality, as well as the clearly enervating nature of that very prosperity in general. One might also speculate on the cultural factors that make this largely an Anglo-American and European phenomenon, as other visible ethnic groups continue having relatively large numbers of children, whether in the West or not.

Parsons then goes on in Part Four to list the economic fallacies, some of which are clearly influenced by the context of the superprosperous period of the time. (The reviewer remembers being told in junior high school in the 1970s that, in the future, hardly anyone would have to

work, and that the main social problem would be how to spend our leisure time happily.) The somewhat related fallacies are that more people = more wealth = more lives; that a declining population results in a shortage of labor; that an aging population creates a burden of dependency; that economies of scale create ever-increasing efficiency (he draws attention to possible *diseconomies* of scale); that an increasing population creates an increasing demand; that technology can always increase production (he shows that there are more people living in poverty than ever before in history); and finally, the fallacy of unlimited economic growth (Chapter 16), which is probably the best chapter in the book. Referring also to the Club of Rome Report, he shows, on the one hand, that unlimited economic growth is *theoretically* ridiculous (as in a few hundred years, everyone becomes a billionaire) and also *practically* unrealizable because of the necessity to conserve the physical environment, the need for open space, etc. He overoptimistically suggests that economic growth will have to stop at the stage where everyone is a millionaire — influenced in this by the 1970s mindset. He concludes with a "Summary and Reflections." Though the reviewer certainly agrees that a steady-state situation is optimal, in the context of the world of the 21st century, this would undoubtedly mean some degree of rationing of such resources as high-quality food, potable water, high-tech healthcare, energy consumption, and personal living-space, as well as population control.

The reviewer does not really accept the thesis combining population control and individual liberty. The situation is simply too far gone today and the pronounced divergences between population growth in the West and the Third World are most striking. While East Asia, buttressed by its various ancient hierarchical traditions, has achieved spectacular economic growth, and also constitutes almost a naturally — if not philosophically — "ecological" regime (as seen, for example, in its comparatively low rates of waste output, and high rates of recycling), sub-Saharan Africa, for example, appears to lead only in rates of human reproduction. While the transition of East Asia to a steady-state society appears possible, the West must realistically prepare to establish meaningful barriers to Third World immigration, as North America, if not already heavily-populated Europe itself, will be subject to incredible demographic pressures in the coming century. Historically-speaking, we might witness — under severe environmental strain — the return of hierarchical, hydraulic or hydraulic-ecological civilizations, certainly in East Asia, and possibly in Europe. It will be up to these societies to maintain ecological control over the entire planet. The place of a stubbornly individualistic, avowedly multicultural, and grossly hyperconsumptionist America, in such a world, is difficult to envision. ■

[Both of these now difficult-to-find books are available from **THE SOCIAL CONTRACT** at \$19.00 each, or \$35.00 for both, including postage and handling.]