

Demographic Masochism

Pitching tents for 'the camp of the saints'

by John Zmirak

This past March (March 9, 1998) environmentalist author Bill McKibben published an op-ed in *The New York Times*, condensed from his new book *Maybe One: A Personal and Environmental Argument for Single-Child Families* (Simon & Schuster, NY). The column appeared just before the Sierra Club was to vote on whether or not to take a position on the environmental impact of mass immigration into the U.S. (Predictably, the anti-immigration initiative failed.) In the piece, McKibben exhibits the standard response of liberal environmentalists to arguments for immigration restriction so compactly and candidly that his ideas deserve a careful look.

McKibben acknowledges the fact that the world's birth rate has dropped to replacement level, and that dangerous population growth in the U.S. is driven by immigration. But McKibben rejects the proposal that we address this problem directly by closing American borders — at least until we have radically altered our own lifestyles. In his view, Americans must defer any immigration reform until we have dropped our native birth rate *well below* replacement level, and reduced our standard of living to something approaching a Third World average.

McKibben's position centers on consumption. We who live in the "developed world" — the West plus Japan — consume vastly more natural resources than individuals living in the Third World. Each of us in New York or Tokyo uses more energy, requires the extraction

John Zmirak, Ph.D. is an essayist and screenwriter living in New York City. His doctorate is in English Literature from Louisiana State University (1996). A frequent contributor to *The Social Contract*, he is currently writing a book on economics.

of more natural resources, and produces more pollution than does the average resident of the Rain Forest or the Kalahari.

From this simple fact, McKibben draws the conclusion that we in the developed world have *less right to reproduce* than residents of poorer countries. And this syllogism makes sense — if you see human beings as hogs at a common trough. No farmer would continue raising two breeds of pig when one required far more grain to fatten up than another. He would swiftly shift to the most efficient breed of swine, as most farmers have in fact already done with a number of domesticated species, at the expense of agricultural biodiversity. The slop-hogging swine would quickly feel the knife — first castration, then slaughter.

There's one flaw in this neat little barnyard calculus: human beings aren't swine (or even cattle). Many of us can produce far more than we consume, and what we are able to produce depends on the technological, political, and economic infrastructure of the nation created

by our ancestors. Those of us who inhabit developed, democratic countries are able to contribute far more to the advancement of science, medicine, technology, and political liberation than those who live in poor, despotic societies. Our aggregate consumption is exceeded by our aggregate production of vaccines, agricultural advances, computer innovations and so on. This is not because we are in any way intrinsically superior to the residents of poor countries; we are simply the heirs of more advanced political, economic, and social arrangements — the hard-won fruits of 2,000 years of a particular civilization. Some dare call it "Christendom."

And we are the *rightful* heirs. Just as our parents worked and saved to advance their own children's prospects, so our ancestors struggled (against invaders and despotic rulers) so that *their descendants* could enjoy freedom, prosperity, and a continuous Western civilization. Each one of us has a personal stake in this heritage, a *property right*.¹ We are shareholders in a

No wonder, then, that the *Camp of the Saints* depicts the villain who throws open Europe's borders to self-destruction out of sheer self-hatred. McKibben's policy recommendations seem equally dangerous.

corporate common good, with the freedom to deed our shares to our children. We can also issue new shares by inviting new immigrants into our country. But we have no moral duty to do so, especially at the expense of our own children, as McKibben perversely suggests.

The Real Common Heritage of Mankind

The political institutions and technological advances that grew out of the developed world are the common heritage of mankind; there is no patent on the free market, democracy, the common law or property rights. Every nation is free to emulate them, even to reproduce the technological advances they produced. But no individual has the right to demand citizenship in any particular foreign country.

Our right to enjoy our nation's heritage carries with it a key responsibility toward other nations: the duty not to step in and mangle their cultures, whether through open colonization, or cultural imperialism conducted by means of trade and propaganda. If we wish to preserve

“Our right to enjoy our nation’s heritage carries with it a key responsibility toward other nations: the duty not to step in and mangle their cultures...”

our culture, then we must respect citizens of other nations who wish to preserve their own, be they Islamic clerics, tribal leaders, or Christian bishops. We should use neither troops, trade, nor treaty to force our ideology, commerce, and sexual mores upon other nations. Where nations in the West have done so in the past throughout Africa and Asia, wherever colonial flags have flown, we now recognize a special responsibility to make reparation. This historic responsibility, and not a general desire to redistribute the wealth, is what motivates French involvement in French-speaking Africa and American involvement in the Philippines. Note that nations are selective in their concern, focusing on nations to which they *owe* something or from which they expect something. Nations really act like communities with

corporate “property rights,” capable of contracting debts and committing torts. Perhaps it is time our abstractions caught up with reality.

Do not be misled. I am not advocating a kind of hard-headed national egoism, but simply the application to international politics of the basic principles of property rights and common law. These are the principles that have made possible the very progress which makes our countries such attractive destinations for emigrants. Were these principles respected around the world, there would soon be no huddled masses desperate to escape. Meanwhile, how would it serve the “global common good” to destroy the handful of nations where liberty and order prevail by swamping them with needy, politically naive refugees? Or to remove the stake each of us has in the future, by denying us the right to reproduce?

Since the Cold War ended in 1989, all reasonable people admit what classical liberal economists always knew: that men will work harder and more prudently for their private and family interests than for the “common good.” So citizens will better tend their local communities and nations than the abstract “biosphere.” If we make nationhood meaningless, we would turn the world from a patchwork of privately owned and tended plots into a global commons. This would diminish the well-being of the whole in order to redistribute goods to some, all in the service of abstract, virtually meaningless ideals. Sound familiar? It was attempted in Russia for 70 years with grim results: poverty, envy, sloth, enormous waste and, not incidentally, a blighted environment.

Adam Smith has been vindicated: free property rights and the rule of law do increase the overall wealth, even of the poor. So the continued growth of the developed world benefits even those who reside outside its borders. The technological, medical and other innovations that result from the American (and Western and Japanese) market economy are quickly transferred around the world, amply justifying our disproportionate consumption of resources. If the developed world, in some fit of self-hatred, were to plunge willfully into a Third World standard of living, does McKibben really think the living standards of poor people elsewhere would be improved? Are our vaccines, manufacturing refinements (including “green” technologies), and agricultural advances really worth so little to the world as a whole that we should smash the economic machine that produces them? Anyone who thinks so certainly has the

duty to emigrate and move to an underdeveloped country (if they will admit him; many countries, including Mexico, have strict barriers to entry).

The Alienable Right to Reproduce

When applied to individual family life, the moral blindness McKibben displays is appalling. He suggests that no individual

American has “the right” to vote to limit immigration unless he or she is personally willing to approximate a Third World standard of living and renounce the right to reproduction by dropping below our current birthrate of 2.1 children per couple. Otherwise, the “right” of would-be immigrants to enter the United States (legally or illegally) must supersede our right to private property and reproductive freedom.

This is an astonishing suggestion. If a human being has any inalienable right beyond that of life, it is the right to reproduce, the right, in fact, to bear as many or as few children as he or she can support without governmental help. (This last clause is key; by removing this proviso, the state gives the green light to irresponsible parenthood, and invariably begins to interfere in family life with programs to encourage or discourage procreation in the attempt to maximize the number of taxpayers and minimize the number of welfare babies. This meddling has gone much further in socialized Europe than in the U.S. Rather than increase the coercive power of the welfare state, the answer is to roll it back.)

As the current birthrate suggests, the pressures of urban life, the increasing expense of education, and other factors of modernization have all interacted to nudge most residents of the developed world to have fewer children (and in some places, such as Italy, too few). Population experts such as Virginia Abernethy have argued persuasively that every society that is forced to live within its means and support most of the population it generates will tend toward an equilibrium in the long run. This is violated if it sends its “bonus” population abroad to colonize other lands that have lower birthrates. The population boom in 19th century Europe, for instance, was made possible by the fact that there was always an America to which one could emigrate if one was out of land or out of luck. At the time, certain U.S. employers

“We owe it to our own children, the descendants of immigrants, to leave them a governable, environmentally sustainable nation.”

lobbied for the admission of masses of unskilled, desperate laborers. We no longer have such a need, so why should we keep on accepting them?

McKibben's argument implies that our reproductive rights are overridden by the “rights” of immigrants to enter our country. This is a truly astounding moral inversion. From whence does this

“McKibben's argument implies that our reproductive rights are overridden by the ‘rights’ of immigrants to enter our country. This is a truly astounding moral inversion. From whence does this immigration ‘right’ derive? What are the duties entailed in it?”

immigration “right” derive? What are the duties entailed in it?

To learn English? To loyally support the U.S. government in preference to any former regime or minority identity? To prefer the national interest of the adopted nation to the special interests of one's former countrymen, or prospective immigrants? To oppose attempts to peel off United States territory, such as the U.S. southwest or “Aztlan” and hand it over to foreign governments? All these duties, which my grandparents accepted as the price of entry, are rejected by multiculturalists and many immigrant activists.

To whom does this “right” to enter America extend? To the 1.1 million immigrants who make their way here legally or illegally each year? To 400,000 people, a figure proposed by some restrictionists? Why not to the entire population of the world? McKibben calls the restrictionist position “piggish” and “immoral.” But by his logic, so is our current immigration policy. To gain his blessing we must either open our borders entirely or sterilize ourselves and retire to live in huts like the Unabomber.

Let's try a thought experiment. Imagine for a moment that no right exists to immigrate into a particular

country at will without that nation's consent. I know — a shocking idea. But this curious notion has been accepted by virtually every immigrant group that came to the U.S. until recently. Certainly my grandfather, Patric Zmirak, never thought he had a presumptive right to enter America. The U.S. government did not admit him in recognition of some such “right” or national “guilt,” or the wealth imbalance between the U.S. and the Hapsburg empire.

No. Grandpa got in because America needed merchant marines during World War I. He signed up for dangerous war-time service and thereby earned the right to emigrate. On the other side of my family, America accepted my Irish-American ancestors because employers claimed they needed cheap, unskilled laborers and farmers to fuel the economy and fill up vast territories that had just been conquered from American Indians and Mexico. These immigrants brought benefits that are familiar to us: brawn and fertility. (We needed these more in 19th century America than we do just now.)

These immigrants also imposed costs, which were felt by the displaced Mexicans and Indians and by the native working class, whose wages fell. When Americans — many of them recent immigrants — decided in the 1920s that the costs of cheap labor, ever-expanding cultural diversity, and a booming population outweighed the benefits, they restricted immigration. In this, they were perfectly within their rights.

It's true that if the U.S. border had been closed in 1915, my family would have stayed in Croatia. Then again, if the border had never closed, we might not have become real Americans. With a constant influx from the “Old Country,” my father might not have learned fluent English, thanks to Slavic bilingual schooling in the Croatian *barrio*. “Assimilation” would have become a dirty word in 1930. Multiculturalism would have arisen 50 years earlier, encouraging my father to be loyal to Fascist Croatia instead of enlisting in the U.S. Army under Patton. The German-American *Bund*, instead of a sick aberration, would have become the model for immigrant-rights groups, as the polyglot scions of Europe, always reinforced, warred among themselves for slices of the vanishing commonweal amid ever-lower wages and the ruins of the labor movement. Ethnic quotas at universities would not have diminished, but would have become ever more entrenched to ensure proportional representation, as

an exploding population crushed the newborn conservationist movement.

This nightmare scenario, which the nativists feared in the 1920s, has already come true in California and our other immigration-receiving states. We owe it to our own children, the descendants of immigrants, to leave them a governable, environmentally sustainable nation. To strangers who have never fought in our wars, plowed our fields, or paid U.S. taxes we owe the good will that all human beings deserve, and our good example, and our prayers.

The Future of the Prudent Immigration Movement

In the course of his piece, McKibben serves to demonstrate the flawed moral logic that beguiles so much of the environmentalist movement and renders it incapable of clear thinking on the subject of immigration. Indeed, we see in McKibben an object lesson of why the Sierra Club initiative was doomed to failure, and why, as I have argued before in *The Social Contract* (Winter 1996-7) the decisive impetus for immigration reform, if it ever comes, will have to come from the nationalist Right, rather than the environmentalist Left.

McKibben accurately mirrors the policy of the leaders of the Sierra Club, who fought bitterly to defeat the immigration reform initiative. These leaders are like too many on the Left who are alienated from the reality that a nation is a community, with communal property rights, of which each *citizen* partakes. Instead, they insist upon “thinking globally.” When foreigners seek to expropriate our national heritage — a relatively uncrowded, clean countryside — what is their response? Is it to depopulate and impoverish our own nations, in the hope, perhaps, that then the huddled masses will leave us alone? Could it be that McKibben is not a real person but a fictitious invention of Jean Raspail? He could be one of the villains of *The Camp of the Saints* who throws open Europe's borders to self-destruction out of sheer self-hatred. I fear, alas, that McKibben is all too real. Certainly, the drive towards cultural suicide, which underlies his policy recommendations, is a real motivating force in the anti-Western ideology called multiculturalism.

Along with this multiculturalism, too many environmentalists are wedded to collectivist economics, to the proposition that the world ought to be and must become a global commons, governed collectively. Garrett

Hardin himself has argued, pessimistically, that world population is already a global commons.² In other words, families can no longer be trusted with their own reproductive decisions since the welfare state has irreversibly thrust the cost of childbearing onto society as a whole and the state must step in and regulate even this intimate realm. Plus, if we think globally, as McKibben would have us do, then this intrusive state which regulates reproduction must act as a world government — a global family planning bureaucracy.

If this is our future then the battle is already lost. No society, from the smallest village to the global one, can prosper under a collectivist regime. Just as the rich farms of Ukraine turned to dustbowls when Stalin collectivized them, so the prosperity of the developed world will blow away, if the binding roots of property, nationhood, family and citizenship are uprooted. In the absence of common law and private profit, no extremes of coercion will serve to ration natural resources effectively, or distribute wealth fairly. If collectivism gains power again, and does so globally through international organizations that usurp particular sovereignty, then we really will have awakened inside George Orwell's nightmare: a tyranny from which there is no escape.

NOTES

¹ For an exposition of this idea see Robert W. Whitaker, "Societal Property Rights," in *The New Right Papers* edited by Robert W. Whitaker, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982.

² See his classic essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons," reprinted in *Managing the Commons*, edited by John Baden and Douglas Noonan, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998.