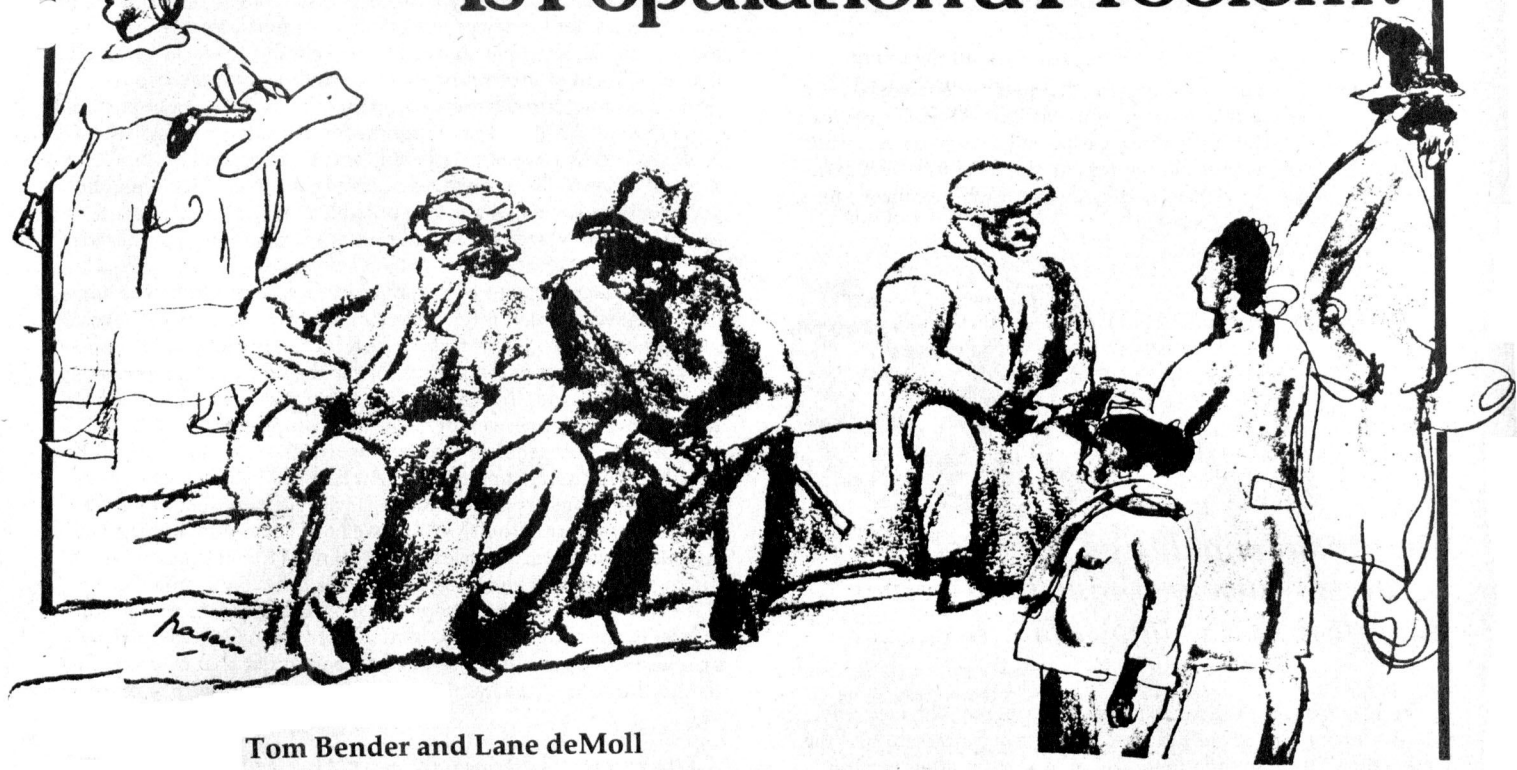
Is Population a Problem?



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For a long time the hullabaloo about the Population Explosion has made us personally uncomfortable at an irrational, unreasonable, *gut* level that is often to be listened to. Over the past year or so the bits and pieces of the factual side of the arguments have been falling into place. That has been paralleled by first-hand experience with the truly sacred atmosphere that surrounds giving birth and the almost magical ability of small children to inspire openness and generosity in those around them—even among strangers in the most unlikely places, like in a bus station or on an elevator. Surely we need more of these warm feelings and bursts of positive energy in the world, not less. The questions raised here are difficult ones and their answers and implications far from sure. Your reactions and responses are welcome.

A number of years ago Mao Tse-Tung quietly challenged the prevalent attitude towards population with an unequivocal statement that people are China's greatest resource. His statement seemed to bewilder most people. Was he referring to something unique to China's situation, or was he saying something quite universal but difficult for our Western ears to understand? Sometime later, E.F. Schumacher made a similar statement in one of his talks—"Each of us is born with a mind and two hands, and should be considered a valuable resource rather than a burden." Again people's reactions seemed to bypass his point. Is it possible that there is a germ of something important here? Could it be that *we* don't understand the population question well enough?

With these questions fermenting in our minds, a recent article on the resistance which various diseases have built up to antibiotics opens up a whole new perspective on the population question. Antibiotics are losing their effectiveness. Using them indiscriminately for every common cold, dumping them into animal feed to counteract unhealthful animal-raising conditions in "food factories," and taking them in massive doses for VD "prevention" as was common in Vietnam has resulted in extremely rapid development of immune strains of various diseases. The dosage of pencillin needed to have any effect is now tens and hundreds of times what was necessary twenty years ago. Many diseases no longer respond to pencillin at all, and require stronger antibiotics that have worse side-effects. Rumors of an untreatable strain of VD have struck fear into the hearts and parts of millions. Similarly, resistances to DDT and other pesticides have been built up by malaria-carrying mosquitos and insects that spread other diseases. As it stands now, the whole spectrum of antibiotics is expected to be useless by about 1985, taking us back to where we were a generation ago before the introduction of wonder drugs.

Almost, but not quite. We will again be without the defenses of antibiotics, but facing much more virulent strains of diseases and having a population with fewer resistances and immunities to disease. Massive epidemics are almost certain. Antibiotics and our cock-sure attitude towards disease and death may very soon be seen as another Faustian Bargain for which we now must pay the bill. A larger population may be the only means of having any change left after paying that bill.

The global population "explosion," and our fear of it, has occurred in large part during this technologically produced lull when we thought ourselves exempt from the laws of nature—when death rates from disease and war were temporarily pushed off into the future. We've been in a lucky period when the four horsemen of the apocalypse were away tending matters elsewhere, but they may be returning soon, and with a vengeance spurred by our own inventiveness. Global war, industrial poisons, radiation-related diseases and newly virulent viruses and bacteria respect no boundaries and put our whole population at risk. When we consider these delayed effects of the actions that have permitted our present short-term population bulge, our fears of overpopulation may become overshadowed by fears of global extinction.

The tenor of the massive U.S. government programs to "encourage" birth control both here and abroad raise other questions as to our true motives. The word "control" is an important one here. Verified news reports have revealed forced sterilization of welfare mothers and Native Americans, as well as massive government-financed export of dangerous and defective birth control devices.

Population cont.

Sterilization campaigns we have urged onto underdeveloped countries have brought public outrage and reaction—including at least one case of the castration of Peace Corps volunteers in retribution. Do these all speak as much of oppressing the poor and "less desirable" parts of the population as they do of a humane concern for the rights and well-being of others?

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The suspicions these actions raise are furthered when we delve into the beginnings of our national population concern to find the Rockefellers, their foundations, and money from other wealthy, liberal Americans providing the dollars, voices, and influence that made population control a major public concern. The impact of people on resources is far from equal—an American consumes as many resources as 25 Indians, and our 6 percent of the world's population consumes more than 40 percent of the world's resources. Is it possible that lurking beneath our well-intended actions might be the unconscious self-interest of a wealthy society and its wealthiest citizens trying to eliminate competitors with stronger claims of need for the world's resources that we monopolize?

The research of Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins at the Institute for Food Development Policy has clearly shown that overpopulation is not the real problem today in any country. The real problem is who controls the land and resources, preventing people from producing the food they need. The fact that many in Central America are forced to eke out a starvation living on precipitous mountainsides does not come from there being too many people. The reality is that almost all of the agricultural land of the country has been "expropriated" by U.S. corporations to grow bananas, coffee, and other luxury products for the American table instead o. food for the local people. Almost 55 percent of the world's farmable land is held out of production by large landowners and corporations. The government-forced growing of cash crops for export instead of food, the use of land for non-food luxury products and to feed livestock instead of people, and corporate control of the food processing system are the cause of people starving. Left alone, hungry people feed themselves. Is it possible that the greed of a few, not the need of many, is the real root of the population problem?

Our concern to keep our own population low in order to keep our per capita wealth high might be acting against our own self-interets in other ways. Would we be better off leaner and keener? Historically it is the individuals, institutions and societies that have had to keep their wits and "hunting skills" sharp that survive, not those who are overfed, overweight, sated and complacent. Is our unnecessary use of other people's resources worth that threat we feel of the possibility of their acting to get them back? How many of our personal possessions are worth the hassle of repairing, hauling around and protecting from theft? Would we have better functioning, safer and more loved communities if the real need for sharing and working together wasn't eliminated by our wealthy "self-reliance"?

To change our views on population probably means more people, at least in the short run. And more people means less for everyone, or so the story goes. But less of *what*, and might that be better for us? To the poor, large numbers of children means *more*—more

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chance for survival, more chance of being supported in old age, more hands to work and bring home income, more loved ones around. It's only when we get to the over-rich, with high material expenditures for college educations, freeways, suburban homes, television sets, etc., that the benefits of people are outweighed by their "costs."

Is it possible that our views on population have not only been short-sighted and self-interested but have robbed us of many benefits of a more loving attitude toward other people? Have we demeaned our feelings and actions toward others by considering them "surplus population" and feeling threatened by their existence, rather than knowing them as real individuals to be loved and cherished? How much do we alter our attitudes towards our bodies and relationships with others when the responsibility and nature of sex is reduced to merely pleasure? Or does that give us a better understanding of the interplay of sex and love? Have we lost sight of

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the incredible positive energy of birth and of children, and their ability to draw people together across almost all barriers of society? Have we not seen in our own lives how much hunger there is in people for that special energy which children give, and how much that gift is valued? Are children and grandchildren a more rewarding "family entertainment cener" than a TV? Have we even, for the moment, lost sight of death and the hard but important lessons it holds for us—of lessening our outsized sense of our own importance and power, of bringing us to truly cherish and live our lives fully, and to understand better the interplay of the varied strands of nature that interweave with our lives?

It is difficult to sort through these complicated personal and social issues. It is important not to belittle the positive personal freedom and empowerment of our increasing ability to choose when and if to have children—particularly for women. Certainly it is the individual's responsibility towards life—one's own and others'—that is important, not directives handed down by the powerful—be they church or state. "Reproductive freedom" is very different from "population control." We are better judges of our personal

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and community resources and what they will support in both numbers and living style than is some distant "authority."

Traditions must be living things and must always be relearned and made real in each of our lives. Such things as Papal proclamations may only be the hollow echo of dead and forgotten beliefs, but we need to listen carefully to them and to other voices that don't mesh easily with our current understandings. They can give us a needed sense of values and beliefs that span more than our own micro-conditions—touchstones that get us to dig deeper and question more fully the basis of our own attitudes.

It's quite possible that in the next twenty years fertility and children will become again a valued survival mechanism, and that their value and role in the whole web of human society will be rediscovered. Looking ahead at that now, we can see the strangeness in our present condition and the value of changing it. We can see how our cultural heritage of "wide-open spaces" blinds us to the value of close community and of self-development in close interaction with others.

We can discover that moral resources are at least the equal of material ones, and that privacy can be found within ourselves as well as in separation from other people. Centeredness can be found in meditation as well as in huge tracts of preserved wilderness. The crowded cultures of Asia have always known this. We can learn that Tender Loving Care can produce more food than can fertilizers, and on tiny plots of land. More people may mean more Beethovens, more Beatles, more Buddhas and more greatness as well as more elbows to bump into. And we may discover that the secrets of the universe can be found in the peaceful oasis of a tiny Zen garden more easily than in our busy cities of today.

It is possible that people, rather than being a problem, may be one of the most precious and wonderful inventions in our universe.

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