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# Anthropological Perspectives on Population Growth[1]

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*Abstract.* Rapid population growth affects many different system levels simultaneously: the individual, the family, the community, the nation-state and the world. What may appear to be an optimal population level for one system, given certain value premises, may not be optimal for another. Anthropologists can contribute to an understanding of rapid growth by generating an appreciation for the complexity of the phenomenon, and by providing representation for a range of cultural viewpoints. This may help to reduce the risk we now run of committing all of mankind to a singular path which may prove to be an evolutionary dead end.

It is an anthropological cliché that the processes affecting socio-cultural systems are extraordinarily complex and resistant to understanding in terms of any simplistic formulas. While we may be able to develop viable dominant-link theories relating population size and structure to social, cultural or psychological variables under relatively stable conditions, under conditions of rapid change demographic variables act as both causes and effects in such a complex manner as to defy formulations of lineal causality. The rapid population growth taking place in the world today is part and parcel of a dynamic (including urbanization, industrialization and modernization) that generates changes in economic and political bases, family structures, belief and value systems, and countless other aspects of 'traditional' life styles.

Thus far anthropologists have paid somewhat more attention to the question of whether or not population growth is a result or a cause of technological innovation (i.e., the Malthusian vs. Boserup hypotheses) than to the more complicated question of how rapid population growth affects operating socio-

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cultural systems and the individuals associated with them. If the results of inquiry into the former question are inconclusive (and they are), those of relevance to the latter issue are nearly non-existent. So instead of presenting the cumulative knowledge of the discipline I represent, I would prefer to raise some issues which anthropological wisdom would seem to single out for examination.

Perhaps the first thing that needs to be pointed out is that rapid population growth affects many different system levels simultaneously: the individual, the family, the community, the nation-state and finally the entire world. Some consequences of rapid growth may affect one system level much more than others, and what may appear to be an optimal population level for one system level, given certain value premises, may not be optimal for another. For example, in order for a nation to optimize its military security vis-à-vis its neighbors, a level of population growth may be called for that would disrupt community and family structures to the point of jeopardizing social and psychological security. Likewise, a rapid growth rate may have very strong benefits for one segment of a population (e.g. developers) but detrimental effects on other segments. We must therefore be extremely cautious in making judgments about the consequences of population growth, and at the very least should specify the systemic level we are dealing with. Realistically, there may not be an optimal population level that could be agreed upon. A precarious balance of costs and benefits within systems, and trade-offs between system levels, may be an inevitability. Ultimately, any system will break down if it is sufficiently overloaded; some may disintegrate sooner than others and the dynamics may vary, but the results are inevitable.

The critical issue we face, therefore, aside from how to check human reproduction before it destroys most of what we value, is to identify mechanisms that can be employed to restrain systemic disintegration, or perhaps more realistically, to delay it until population trends can be controlled. But we are confronted with an unfortunate paradox, namely that traditional cultures have provided humanity with its most effective mechanisms for dealing with the problems of intensification and crowding, while these very cultural patterns are the ones that are under most serious assault by the processes of industrialization and modernization. Anthropological studies have shown that people can live relatively comfortably in situations of very high density and almost no physical privacy, as long as basic needs are met and social interaction is regulated by cultural rules controlling competition and providing for social-psychological, if not physical, withdrawal. The literature is replete with such mechanisms as reciprocity and compulsory generosity, avoidance, ritual joking and the muting of cues as a means of diminishing communication loads. These mechanisms have been found to carry over into urban slums and squatter communities in developing societies, and to sustain a gratifying social life for most participants even under incredibly squalid physical and economic conditions. No one familiar with such com-

munities can take seriously the simplistic assumption that crowding *causes* social and psychological breakdown.

The issue of what constitutes excessive population is inevitably a relative one — relative on the one hand to the physical environment and on the other hand to the social-psychological context. Thus we might define a population as excessive either if it surpasses the capacity of environmental resources to sustain it, or if it exceeds the socioenvironmental capacity to meet aspirations. Quite obviously, a definition based on aspirations implies a lower threshold than one based on mere physical survival; it is also subject to greater empirical fluctuation, particularly in modernizing societies.

From an operational point of view neither definition is easy to apply. Even from the sheer physical point of view there are insurmountable problems in trying to define the 'carrying capacity' of an environment in absolute terms. Not only are environmentally derived resources subject to variation over time, but the needs of a population change with alterations in age and sex structure, the incidence of endemic illnesses, etc. The problem of measurement is made even more complex, of course, by the fact that actual resources are not always perceived as resources; people virtually never make use of all potential resources simply because they culturally define some usable parts of the environment as unusable. Furthermore, no measure of resources to persons can be taken seriously that does not account for differential distribution.

As several of us learned at a recent conference on Atoll populations, there are acute difficulties in defining a concept like 'carrying capacity' even when the ecological niche is an isolated island of a few hundred acres. When resource systems are opened up through circulatory migration to the extent that they are in nation-states, the problems of defining such a concept are simply insurmountable.

When aspirations are used as the basis for determining excessive population, additional complexities are obviously introduced. Aspirations are subject to such rapid increase that even under conditions in which resources are expanding relative to population, the experience may be one of social and psychological deterioration. Further problems are engendered in the question of whose aspirations are changing and whose remain stable, in differential access to resources and power necessary to meet aspirations, and so forth.

The following are some of the major contributions anthropologists can make in diagnosing the situation and perhaps increasing our collective awareness of what might be done:

First of all, anthropologists have more to contribute by developing and communicating an appreciation for the complexity of population processes than by seeking to produce tightly formulated theories. Good, strong theoretical propositions are necessary, but other disciplines are better equipped to develop them. The important thing to recognize is that even the most potent social

theories generally account for relatively low levels of variance and therefore do not provide very compelling guides to social action. Applied social science is littered with the refuse of nifty theories that 'almost worked,' or 'would have worked if only . . .'. Through good sound ethnographies of communities and networks of communities we might be able to sensitize ourselves to the range of potential ramifications of population growth under a variety of conditions, and by doing so stave off some of the excesses that stem from treating theoretical propositions as articles of faith. Perhaps the most important understandings that might derive from such an approach will come from analyses that cut across systemic levels, e.g., the effects of populations processes on individuals *in relation* to their families, communities, economic organizations, nation, etc.

The importance of understanding complexity rather than urging anthropologists to grab for the brass ring of ultimate theory, is that rational decision-making at all levels is likely to be better served through an awareness of how much we do not know than by merely taking into account what we think we know. Social scientists sometimes use theories as substitutes for thinking, and where the stakes are as high as they are in our worldwide concern for population growth, hard thinking is a resource we can ill afford to lose. Related to this concern is that the input for problem-solving efforts may involve an over-representation of Western thought, and hence values — in short, that 'rationality' may become identified with the viewpoint of only one segment of mankind. Here, too, anthropologists ought to be able to make important contributions. By explicating the logic of alternate systems of thought and value, particularly as these relate to variant ecological conditions, anthropologists can provide representation for viewpoints that would not otherwise be heard.

I mentioned that we are caught in a paradoxical situation — one in which the cultural solutions to crowding are being lost at the same time that crowding is being generated by rapid population growth. As a corollary, before this century change had been slow enough to allow inherent adaptive processes, both biological and cultural, to work out 'solutions' to person-nature and person-person imbalances. Events did not always work out ideally by anyone's reckoning, but there were forces operating to keep living systems, including groups at various levels of inclusiveness, within a range of equilibrium that allowed for further, sometimes radical, adjustments when conditions changed. In evolutionary language, the rate of change allowed for the human species to explore alternative evolutionary adjustments to radical alterations in its physical and social environment. There were only limited dead ends for small segments of mankind. But now that the pace of change has accelerated and the human species has become so much more a part of an integral worldwide ecological system, natural (i.e., undirected) adaptive processes may be too slow to preserve the desired level of flexibility. For this reason it is even more important that we maximize the breadth of cultural viewpoints that feed into evaluations of 'the

population problem.' In fact, we must build into our overall thinking a wide range of social experiments, so that if one track proves impracticable, the human species is not irrevocably committed to it. We are only now beginning to comprehend the full implications of world-wide industrialization; we are only vaguely aware of what the problems are, and are hardly in a position to formulate compelling solutions, let alone to commit mankind to a singular path.

There are, of course, other contributions anthropologists can make on specific topics intimately associated with population growth. We can help demographers understand cultural variations in the significance of the events they work with – birth, marriage, divorce, death and so on; we can help sociologists to prepare and interpret their survey materials by illuminating the socio-cultural contexts in which they are conducted; we can assist psychologists by helping them to recognize the limitations of Western viewpoints, particularly those that isolate human beings analytically from their social and physical environments, and, of course, we can assist planners and administrators to recognize and consider the multitudinous socio-cultural factors that may affect their programs. The common thread that runs through all these tasks is the quest for *meaning* – for the symbolic significance of events and processes that surround population processes. Coming to grips with meaning, and by implication values, is ultimately a subjective process that goes well beyond the mere interpretation of variable relationships. In sum, from the holistic perspective of anthropology, the current population explosion is a phenomenon that transcends just about every conceptual boundary we have drawn. Coping with it will require a great deal of flexible, innovative thought. We must not be limited by the constraints of culture-bound and/or discipline-bound conceptualizations.

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