
BACKGROUND BOOKS

POPULATION AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

"The scourges of pestilence, famine, wars, and earthquakes have come to be regarded as a blessing to overcrowded nations, since they serve to prune away the luxuriant growth of the human race." So wrote the Christian theologian Tertullian during the second century A.D., when the earth's population was only about 300 million—or six percent of what it is today (five billion).

Tertullian's observation, and the book in which it appears—Garrett Hardin's **Population, Evolution and Birth Control** (W. H. Freeman, 1964, cloth; 1969, paper)—remind the reader that the Reverend Thomas R. Malthus (1766–1834) was not the first writer to reflect on the hazards of under- or overpopulation. Hardin pulled together a rich menu on the subject—everything from Han Fei-Tzu's fifth-century B.C. observations on fecundity and prosperity to the government of India's 1962 birth control campaign slogan: "Don't postpone the first, don't hurry up the second, and don't go in for the third."

Malthus's **Essay on the Principle of Population** (1798; Penguin, 1970, paper only) still stands as the single most influential work on population. The English economist's argument is well known: "It may be safely asserted," Malthus wrote, "that population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical progression [whereas] the means of subsistence, under circumstances most favorable to human industry, could not possibly be made to increase faster than in an arithmetical ratio."

Thus Malthus, as Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal observed 142 years later, "shifted the blame for misery from Society to Nature, from environment to heredity." Myrdal believed that a prudent society could control its own destiny. But in **Population: A Problem for Democracy** (Harvard, 1940),

Myrdal foresaw a conflict in democratic countries between private wants (whether to have children) and public needs (to boost or limit population). "The population question," he predicted, "will dominate our whole economic and social policy for the entire future."

Myrdal's prognosis was at least partly correct. The immediate post-World War II years saw the appearance of several population "scare books." William Vogt's **Road to Survival** (William Sloane, 1948), for example, stressed what would become an oft-repeated theme: the interdependence between human beings and their planet. "An eroding hillside in Mexico or Yugoslavia," Vogt said, "affects the living standard and probability of survival of the American people." Vogt also alerted Americans to the increasing multitudes of "Moslems, Sikhs, Hindus (and their sacred cows)," whose populations ballooned due to "untrammeled copulation."

Paul R. Ehrlich's **Population Bomb** (River City, rev. ed., 1975, cloth; Ballantine, rev. ed., 1976, paper) dramatized the threat of overpopulation for the next generation of Americans. Only some five million people, Ehrlich estimated, had inhabited the planet in 6000 B.C. Doubling every 1,000 years, the world's population reached 500 million by A.D. 1650, and then began to accelerate rapidly. It doubled again in just 200 years, hitting one billion by 1850, and reached two billion by 1930. Should the world's population continue to grow by two percent annually (doubling every 35 years), Ehrlich warned, 60 million billion people (or 100 for every *square yard* of the globe's surface) would be swarming the earth by the year 2900.

Ehrlich also publicized many of the environmental hazards commonly associated with overpopulation and industrialization—such as the "greenhouse ef-

fect"—all well known today. A slight warming of the globe, resulting from an overabundance of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, generated by the burning of fossil fuels, could melt the polar ice caps, raising ocean levels by some 250 feet. Asked Ehrlich: "Gondola to the Empire State Building, anyone?"

More recent works on the "population problem" are less apocalyptic, for several reasons. As Rafael M. Salas, executive director of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, points out in **Reflections on Population** (Pergamon, 2nd ed., 1986), the *rate* of population growth worldwide has dropped dramatically, from 2.03 percent in 1970-75 to 1.67 percent in 1980-85. Demographers now expect the globe's population to hit 6.1 billion by A.D. 2000, and level off at 10.2 billion by the end of the next century. And, "despite rapid population growth," as the National Research Council's scholarly **Population Growth and Economic Development** (National Academy, 1986, paper only) observes, "developing countries have achieved unprecedented levels of income per capita, literacy, and life expectancy over the last 25 years."

Much current research focuses on the environmental (rather than the economic) effects of population growth. The best, most comprehensive surveys include **State of the World 1986** by Lester Brown et al. (Norton, 1986, cloth & paper); the World Resources Institute's **World Resources 1986** (Basic, 1986, cloth & paper); and economist Robert Repetto's **Global Possible** (Yale, 1985, cloth & paper). All of these works emphasize that the "state of the world" varies from country to country. Two of the 23 scientists and environmentalists who contributed to Repetto's

book, for example, found that the rate of annual deforestation ranges from a safe 0.6 percent of all woodlands in the Congo and Zaire to a dangerous four to six percent in the Ivory Coast and Nigeria. Limiting population, Repetto says, is just one way to help preserve world resources. Governments, he stresses, must also provide better management of land, forests, and waterways. Underdeveloped countries, meanwhile, need easier access to credit, new technologies, and small-scale investment.

Indeed, these three books suggest that the "spaceship earth" approach to population and development problems may be misguided. As former *New York Times* man Pranay Gupte writes in his highly readable **Crowded Earth** (Norton, 1984), "people do not live on the 'globe' but in villages and towns, within the walls of their houses or shacks or tenements."

Gupte spent 14 months traveling through 38 impoverished countries around the world to discover how ordinary people cope in overpopulated and underdeveloped communities.

He spoke, for example, with Ibrahim Mesahi, a grocery store owner in bustling downtown Lagos. The population of Nigeria's capital shot up, largely through in-migration, from 1.4 million in 1970 to 3.6 million in 1985. But Gupte found that Mesahi had no interest in birth control, at least not for himself. "I need all the help I can get," explained Mesahi. "I have 10 boys and one girl . . . with my children, at least I can watch them. They are honest."

The author, however, still favors population education programs. "When it is demonstrated to people that 'small is beautiful,'" he says, "their choice will be for small families, not large ones."