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The Crusade Against Population **by George C. Leef**

Population Control: Real Costs, Illusory Benefits by Steven W. Mosher (Transaction Publishers, 2008); 300 pages.

You have probably never heard of Dr. Reimert Ravenholt, but he was one of the most influential people of the 20th century. More than anyone else, Ravenholt was responsible for putting together the worldwide network of population-control programs and agencies. Appointed in 1966 to be the first director of the Office of Population in the United States Agency for International Development, Ravenholt was an arch-Malthusian who saw human fertility as a looming planetary disaster. Backed by a large supply of federal tax dollars, he zealously went about promoting contraception, sterilization, and abortion as the cure for the “plague” of too many children.

The result of Ravenholt’s global crusade against human fertility (which almost always proceeds under such euphemisms as “family planning” or “reproductive health”) has been what Steven Mosher calls in his book *Population Control* the “white pestilence” — that is, a dearth of children in the population. Mosher, president of Population Research Institute, argues strongly that the Malthusian worry that people would breed themselves into disaster was always wrong, but we do face, if not a disaster, at least severe socioeconomic problems from the fact that in many countries the fertility rate has been below the population-replacement rate for decades.

Mosher has put his finger on another instance of the general case that government intervention in the spontaneous order of the world is counterproductive. When government intervenes, resources are squandered to “solve” a small or imaginary problem and in doing so it creates a large and real problem. I’m delighted that the author has shown that the population-control movement is another of those blunders. As he puts it,

For over half a century, the population controllers have perpetrated a gigantic, costly and inhumane fraud upon the human race, defrauding the people of developing countries of their progeny and the people of the developed world their pocketbooks.

A passionately held but erroneous belief supported by government money and force is always harmful, and Mosher makes a good case that the population-control crusade is one of the worst ever.

The population-control bureaucracy, he shows, usually relies on deception, coercion, and even violence to accomplish its objectives. Local officials are generally paid (with money that came initially from American taxpayers) on the basis of the number of sterilizations and abortions they bring about. Most of them are not much concerned about the rights of the individuals. Mosher recounts many heart-wrenching stories about the despicable tactics of the anti-childbirth enforcers. In any population, you'll find a percentage of people who have no qualms about using force against their fellow citizens. In Nazi Germany, they were drawn to the Gestapo; in the Soviet Union, to the KGB. Today, that kind of person can find satisfying employment in the "family planning" apparatus in many countries in Asia, Africa, and South America.

All right, it's too bad if population-control officials sometimes go overboard, but isn't it crucial that "we" do something to stop human breeding before it's too late? "We" must take action unless "we" want to face widespread famine, resource depletion, and pollution, don't we? That is the justification advanced not just by the Ravenholts of the world, but also by the "greens" who proclaim that the world's population needs to fall dramatically to reach the point of "sustainability." (Mosher cites one "expert" who states that the ideal population for the United States is only 90 million — less than one-third its present size.) These alarmists have propounded the widely accepted idea that it is irresponsible for parents to have more than two children and that they're being really friendly to Mother Earth if they have just one child, or none at all.

Mosher offers a powerful rebuttal to the addled notion that it is "healthy" to have a small population and harmful to have a large one. He writes,

[Simple] Malthusian pie-sharing ignores mankind's most common response to the needs of a growing population: We alter apparently fixed conditions by expanding the inventory of goods and services available. A community with more children is generally going to hire another teacher, not begin rationing downward the years of education that each student will receive.

The larger the population, the more extensive the division of labor can be and the more improvements are discovered. People aren't pollution.

As I had anticipated, Mosher cites the work of the late Julian Simon, that *bête noir* of the gloom-and-doom crowd. In his book *The Ultimate Resource*, Simon punctured the theories of the

population-control advocates by showing that larger populations stimulate production. People are not just mouths; they also have brains. After Simon's work, the idea that population control is imperative stood on ice just as thin as the labor theory of value did, and Mosher reminds us of that.

Population and foreign affairs

As feeble as population-control theory is, there has never been any real debate over the wisdom of population-control programs in government circles. They have been in the hands of zealots such as Ravenholt all along. When challenged on occasion by members of Congress who think their programs are a waste of money, the population-control bureaucracy usually responds by dismissing the skeptics as religious simpletons.

Even the military is, at a strategic level, behind population-control programs in other countries. Mosher reports on a 1988 Pentagon document maintaining that American security is threatened by the combination of low fertility in the West and high fertility in lesser-developed countries. The LDCs might field huge armies against dwindling numbers of American and NATO troops! It is truly an instance of generals' preparing to fight the last war, or more accurately several wars back. Massive infantry armies predominated in the mid 20th century, but even if poor nations could arm and support huge numbers of soldiers, they are hardly a threat to the United States and its very high-tech military.

On the contrary, Mosher argues, America's anti-natal campaign engenders hostility that does threaten the country with harm. That's particularly true in Islamic countries, where contraception and abortion are seen as sacrilegious. Despite efforts at masking the truth, people in those countries know that the United States is behind the population-control measures they detest. "It is no accident," Mosher writes, "that U.S.-funded medical clinics are targeted by the Taliban in Afghanistan, since they are seen as promoting contraception, sterilization, abortion, and sex education, all activities which are anathema not just to the mullahs, but to village elders as well." So instead of improving America's strategic position and security, U.S. population-control programs are actually adding fuel to the fire of militant Islam's hatred of America.

It is ironic that some of the most adamant population-control advocates are environmentalists who believe that it's always bad to tamper with nature. The anti-natal tampering is leading to some very serious consequences. Consider what the Chinese have managed to do. Owing to their mania for family planning, in just a few decades they will be looking at some unpleasant demographics — a cohort of older people that's much bigger than the work force needed to support it, and a shortage of young women for young Chinese men to marry. The latter problem is due to the fact that boys are culturally preferred and under China's draconian one-child policy, female babies are often aborted. Chinese growth and modernization may come to a grinding halt once population numbers reverse.

Most European countries are also facing a demographic crisis. Throughout Europe, the low fertility rates do not result from strict population-control programs, but rather from the confluence of the welfare state and the propaganda that small families are more “responsible.” Mosher points out that those economies face stagnation, as fewer and fewer young workers are available to take the place of those who retire. Furthermore, state pension plans will “hemorrhage red ink” trying to pay all the promised benefits to an elderly cohort that outnumbers the young. European political leaders have been aware of this looming crisis for years and have attempted to reverse the fertility trend with incentives for families to have more children. Those efforts, however, have barely changed the trend lines and Mosher contends that they can’t work. In perhaps the most incendiary lines of this incendiary book, he writes,

[The] welfare state itself, with its high tax rates and usurpation of family functions, relentlessly drives down fertility. In this sense, it is *paternalistic government itself that is the problem*.

Humanity has recovered from population disasters in the past, such as the Black Death, but that didn’t distort the balance of the population between old and young. Nor was it coupled with the nasty intergenerational politics of the modern welfare state. Mosher’s excellent discussion of the long-run population problems Americans have created with their tampering with the natural order through population control and welfarism makes his book one of the most thought-provoking I have read in years.

And yet, despite the fact that fertility has been falling around the world and total population is expected to peak in the middle of this century and then begin falling, the anti-fertility movement just keeps going and going, pushing contraception and sterilization in poor countries where serious health needs go unmet. Mosher thinks it is time to take the batteries out of this Energizer Bunny by eliminating its government funding.

Population Control should provoke a long-overdue reassessment of “family planning” programs and the impact of the welfare state.

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