

Overpopulation and Industrialism

by Miss Ann Thropy

In a recent meeting of the Common Market (European Economic Community), demographic experts, especially from France, expressed alarm at the decline in birth rates among some member nations. Part of this concern is cultural and ethnic: because the politics of the post-war era have made it difficult for European nations to prevent immigration, a fall in birth rates may lead not to a fall in population, but an influx of immigrants, mostly from the Third World, where population is increasing due to the dispersion of medical and industrial technology that the Common Market encourages.

The main issue, however, was not national continuity but the continuation of *industrial economy*. Demographers pointed out that decreased birth rates will produce a population graph in the shape of an inverted bell, top-heavy with elderly, "unproductive" citizens on a diminishing base of young, productive workers. The results would be disastrous to the social economy. The welfare and social security systems would lose their tax support. The accumulation of capital would shrink as total consumption fell. Agricultural prices would plunge. Soccer stadiums would be half empty. Almost every aspect of industrial society would be affected.

They are, of course, right. For that reason in itself, real population decline is desirable. But it indicates how deeply economic forces and the social power vested in them are involved in the population problem. For environmentalists, it's not simply a matter of convincing people of the soundness of population control — to do so confronts the very existence of industrial power (as indeed every deep-ecological argument does).

We can take heart in the fact that industrial planners are not just being paranoid. Population decline can indeed change the way social power is or-

ganized and how it exploits nature. (The axiom that large masses of people are easier to control than small ones is correct.) The demise of feudalism, for example, is directly attributable to the Black Plague, to which one-third of Europe succumbed. It became impossible for a landlord to keep his serfs on his fiefdom, despite passage of stringent laws, when serfs could sell their valuable labor in town or to property owners willing to pay for their services. As it turned out, the social economy that followed was probably worse than feudalism from an environmental point of view, but only after power reorganized itself into institutions that could exploit nature and only because a critique of feudalism had not been articulated in terms of its power relations.

What is happening now in Europe suggests that, government policies notwithstanding, populations naturally decline when they reach an unhealthy level. No doubt, there are biological constraints at work here, as scientific studies of animal populations indicate. The sheer stress of living in an unnatural, overcrowded, urban society must play a part in the declining birth rates of the West, though I'm not aware of any research concentrating on the physiological and psychological effects of overpopulation on human reproduction.

But this only underscores the necessity of seeing the population issue in the context of social power and its hierarchies. The problems of population, immigration and industrialism are interrelated to the extent that the power relations in our society cannot let this natural decline occur if they are to be maintained. Likely, the tenants-in-chiefs of feudal Europe would have used immigration to shore up their position, had the technology to move vast numbers of people been available. There is no doubt that the modern Western technocracies do use immigration to propagate industrialism. Industrialism

requires overpopulation: the concentration of power in government and corporate control implies a diffuse body of cheap labor from which that power can be organized. Whether technological societies get this through "incentives" for higher birth rates or through immigration makes little difference from an environmental perspective, although the subsequent rift between cultural and economic values may be a point of access for a further critique of technological economy, assuming we understand "culture" in its proper, tribal, decentralized origins, and not as a product of the modern culture industry.

(It is interesting to note the problem of population maintenance in communist technocracies. These states haven't needed immigration and forbid it, since the concentration of power depends on a perennial, institutionalized source of cheap labor and this constitutes virtually the entire population of communist technocracies. At least this was true of communism in an undeveloped state like Bolshevik Russia. But the populations of some industrialized communist societies are now declining, probably due to the same biological causes as in the West, but also due to the availability of birth control techniques and the general suppression of sexuality as subversive. The recent move toward capitalism in communist Europe — such as the new Soviet law permitting family businesses — perhaps relates to government attempts to maintain overpopulation, though it wouldn't surprise me if the Soviet bloc countries eventually adopted a policy of large-scale immigration to sustain their languishing industrial economies.)

There is no way to dissociate the population issue from industrialism. To disregard their interconnections dooms any attempt to reduce population in the developed countries to an ecologically sane level, and insures the sustained overpopulation of the Third World.

Emigration from the Third World is a result of industrialization *and* an impetus for it. The importation of technology is at the root of population increases in undeveloped countries, since it is often based on "humanitarian" aims involving medical technology. The industrialization of the Third World cannot even sustain the expanding population in the short-run; the Western technocracies will not be able to do so in the long-run. The emigration resulting from the failure of industrialism to sustain the population that it promotes, encourages the global concentration of power in technocratic control by concealing the failure of industrialism; whereas traditional economies meet human needs within the bounds of natural cycles.

It should be clear from this that discussions of "social justice" taking immigration or economic inequality as their themes serve only to cloud the population debate, due to the simple fact that, in a technological context, there is no such thing as "justice," it being supplanted by a network of power relations that spread inevitably over every aspect of human and natural existence. Justice and freedom and all higher values are at home only in a decentralized, anarchistic setting, which presupposes Earth as wilderness. Ethical discourse in technological culture is merely the rattling of our ancestors' bones — unless it is directed against that culture in its totality. Otherwise a commitment to justice becomes just another way for technology to propagate its power relations (as I believe is the case on the overpopulation issue.)

Whatever practical efforts we use to decrease population, they need to be based on undermining industrialism. Inevitably, this will involve controversial stands, since modern ethical discourse is bound up with industrial values. The loud criticism against Garret Hardin and his call to end immigration brings this point home. But biocentric environmentalists must have the courage to take the population debate beyond economic and political calculations. Who else is there to do it?