How to delay the adoption of family planning

A brief historical outline of the population control movement.

Pierre Pradervand.

It is indispensable, if one wishes to have a relatively clear understanding of the ideas circulating among those who want to "control" world population, (and this appears to mean especially the "rampant" population growth of the poor countries) to give a brief historical glance backwards.

When people refer to Thomas Robert Malthus today, they rarely bother to situate him socially. This is regrettable, for Malthus's ideas are far more the ideas of a class, than of an individual. The tremendous success of Malthus's ideas (his famous Essay on the Principle of Population first appeared in 1798) was due mainly to the fact that he made the poor responsible for their own plight. Poverty was the natural result of the fact that sooner or later population outstrips the food supply. Furthermore, by having large families, workers occasioned an over-abundance of cheap labor which drove down their salaries until their numbers receded and equilibrium was again established. All this, of course, was due to "natural laws" ordained by God. The only hope for workers was sexual restraint - abstinence or delayed marriage. How comforting it was for the ruling classes of the day to have their selfishness rationalized, yea, justified by such eminent a man, and a parson at that!

Malthus's ideas did not go unchallenged. William Godwin, an early socialist, was to contest the malthusian analysis and claimed - as most socialist oriented thinkers have since then - that the basic causes of poverty resided in the organisation of society, and that this organisation was what needed to be changed, rather than eliminating people. This debate was to continue almost uninterrupted from the early years of the 19th century until today. History was to repeat the
twice - in the latter part of the 19th century: first between the neo-malthusians and the socialists and nascent labor movement (especially in Britain); and again since the fifties, with the birth of a truly world-wide movement of population control impelled by the West and especially the United States.

The neo-malthusians — an expression coined to describe themselves by the militant disciples of Malthus who undertook to actively spread his ideas in the latter half of the 19th century, — differed from Malthus in one important respect; they actively propagated "artificial" methods of birth control. But otherwise, they were strictly faithful to his thinking. From 1880 onwards, the British Neo-malthusian movement published a newspaper entitled The Malthusian, the subtitle of which was, "A Crusade against Poverty". The neo-malthusians saw themselves first and foremost as crusaders against misery, (at a latter stage, eugenic arguments compounded their sad philosophy by encouraging the procreation of the rich and the diminution of the poor, supposedly eugenically "less fit"). One of the pioneers of the movement, C.V. Drysdale, mentioned that the first aim of birth control was to diminish the birth rate until it came into balance with the means of subsistence, "in view of eliminating misery or absolute poverty". The same author wrote that "remuneration of labor depends on demand and supply, and the only really effective means of improving the position of the workers lies in their restricting their numbers" (underscoring mine). The eugenic note was later added when Drysdale wrote that it was important to introduce birth control among the poor, because "the poor, improvident, mentally and physically inferior types flood society with weakly and defective offsprings". Three years ago, one of the leading (white) American specialists of the demography of Black Americans was to say almost the same thing to me — in reference to American blacks. Quite a few American whites seem to have been thinking along those lines, because...
the black American publication Ebony, in its issue of October 1973, stated that close to one thousand American women - mostly poor blacks - had been sterilized without consent in recent years.

Another apostle of the movement, F.B. Sumner, was to write: "A sort of Gresham's law prevails in the multiplication of human beings. Evidence from a wide range of sources shows that roughly speaking the fertility of the various elements of our population is inversely proportional to their mental, moral and social worth... If we grant, as we must, that these differences in worth are, in part at least, hereditary, the case for racial deterioration seems complete". Having made such a diagnostic, the author comes to the necessary conclusion that "to slow down reproduction among the relatively inefficient - the "exploited" classes if you chose - would be at once the greatest possible single step in the improvement of their condition and an equally important boon to the human race of tomorrow". By a strange coincidence, these "exploited classes", at least in the United States, were mostly poor blacks, poor Irish or dark-skinned south European catholics, east European Jews, etc... - certainly not middle class, white, anglo-saxon protestants.

Even as remarkable a person as Margaret Sanger, who started her career as a quasi-anarchist feminist, as her birth control movement started attracting middle-class respectability and support, claimed that "the chief issue of birth control is more children for the fit, less for the unfit".

The scene is ready for "broadening" the horizon, and the "dangerous" (or "inefficient" or "exploited") classes will slowly take on a darker hue, and be situated less in Manchester or New York, more and more in India, China, Africa, Latin America. It is very important to realize this link between the birth controllers of the early 20th century and many population controllers of today. The latter ones speak of dependancy ratios, KAP surveys, (knowledge, attitude and practise of...
family planning), growth rates and the like, but below the veneer of scientific phraseology one finds too often the same motives, the same fears, the same will-to-power in the form of controlling other people's numbers rather than one's own babylonian consumption.

Thus, in 1917 already, Dr. A. Robinson, in a preface to the book by A. Moore aptly entitled "Uncontrolled Procreation, or Fertility against Civilisation" wrote:

"There is an important point we have to keep in mind. It is our duty to preach birth control in our own countries, the countries we like to call civilised. But we have an equal, if not greater duty, to disseminate the principles and practise of birth control in the backward nations, the nations with a higher birth rate. It is of the greatest importance for the future of mankind that the Gospel of birth control be preached incessantly and with persistence to the peoples of Russia, China, Japan, India, Mexico, etc. It is not good for the civilised nations to reduce their birth rate to the desired minimum and allow the backward races to breed without restriction. Troubles would certainly ensue in the following years. It behooves us to communicate with minds that understand us in different countries and to exhort them to become apostles of the religion of birth control. If we cannot find indigenous apostles, we shall have to send our own."

Which is what effectively happened: everywhere in the Third World apart from China, family planning programs - especially in the nineteen sixties, but as early as the nineteen twenties in India - were the result of Western influences, and most often of the direct intervention of Western experts ("experts").
Long before Stephen Enke or John D. Rockefeller, birth control was seen as the solution to the economic problems of the colonial countries. It is no coincidence that it was in Porto-Rico, a former American possession, that birth control was first introduced on a large scale in the Third World. The Birth Control News of July 1937 quotes the acting governor of the island as stating that "the island, for a long time probably, would continue to be essentially agricultural with no industrialization in sight to provide work for the present unemployed. The inevitable conclusion, the Acting Governor said, was to attack the evil at the source through sane and humane birth control. He said the island's budget could not now provide elementary schools for all the children and that the number unable to go to school was increasing".

Contraception rather than jobs: who took that decision? The formerly devoutly Catholic Porto-Rican people? Hardly - but the American economy which "needed" cheap, abundant manpower. The same pattern, with slight variations, has been followed in many other territories.

As social reforms and anti-poverty measures were growingly adopted by the legislators of the Anglo-Saxon and Western European nations - and, also, as birth control came to be adopted on a growing scale for its individual and health advantages - the neo-malthusian movement petered out. The movement - but not, of course, the thinking. For the problems were basically the same, and the issues of stark poverty were, as affluence spread in the West, to move to the former Western colonies (Africa, Asia) and zones of economic influence.

The white man's burden becomes the white man's fear.

As the balance of power slowly, very slowly, changed and ex-colonial territories acquired at least a veneer of "independence", (albeit very formal, as is now openly acknowledged), and as the widespread application of various cheap public health methods dramatically lowered
death rates in these countries, new problems arose. They were distro put into power by the former colonial occupant or their economic interests by monied chains, could be relatively easily controlled. But the "stirring masses" resulting from the "demographic explosion" (one of the greatest misnomers of modern history) - especially if they were hungry or jobless - could raise these problems. They could revolt. They might even - supreme horror - "go to mud". (and there were rather unpleasant examples of this evolution all too readily available: China, North Vietnam, Cuba, to a lesser extent Algeria and others.). This would not only upset the balance of power but could - a much more serious problem - lead to decreasing access to cheap raw materials, raise their prices... who knows, even cut off their supply? The whole basis of Western affluence would instantaneously crumble.

This was, by and large, the reasoning which led to massive Western involvement in population control. A small group of people in the most conservative circles of American society started disseminating the idea of the urgent need of population control in the Third World. (A rather large number of books printed in the late forties and fifties in the USA stated this very crudely.) Thus, in a book with the revealing title Too Many Asians published in 1959, J. Robbins candidly wrote, "There are too many Asians for their own good. They have been breeding trouble for themselves - and for the world as a whole"... "When the sun goes down on an Indian village, the people are left in darkness. They have no books, no movies, no television. There is only one thing to do - go to bed. There they find their sole source of recreation and amusement, their brief escape from the hours of hard work of the day. At the root of Asia's problem of population is copulation" (sic). Not poverty, drought, poor government, cheap prices for raw materials are the problem... No, but some rampant libido unleashed on the Third World...
Much more sophisticated authors, even world renowned demographers, vehicled basically the same message, albeit in more acceptable tones. Thus K. Davis in a paper entitled "Population and Power in the Free World" wrote in 1958, "If it be granted that the demographic problems of the underdeveloped countries, especially in the areas of non-Western culture, make these nations more vulnerable to communism, the question arises: what population policies can the free world pursue? It would appear that an appropriate policy would be the control of birth-rates, the lowering of death rates, the provision of technical assistance and economic aid, and the formation of military alliances".

Foundations (such as the Population Council) were founded with the sole aim of studying the "population problem" (one never spoke about the poverty problem or drought problem: as for overconsumption, it did not even exist—to hint at it would have drawn immediate ridicule). University centers received large sums of money to train specialists—the training being oriented more and more in neomalthusian terms, even if the language used stayed "scientific". (You can starve a man to death and state with "scientific objectivity" that "The interruption of signals on the electroencephalograph appears to have resulted from considerable diminution of the intake of daily calorie requirements"). Many sincere demographers in the Population Establishment have protested strongly against such accusations levelled against them by more radical population specialists, accusing the latter of being "unscientific" when in fact the radicals were simply refusing to accept the very definition of the "population problem" and "demographic enquiry" made in the name of science by the leading population institutions.

Given the immense weight of the United States in world scientific research and the dominance of English in the field of scientific publications, given the availability of abundant scholarships in the field of population, the resurrected neomalthusian way of thinking
has rapidly spread to most of the Western world, and even many developing countries, not to mention international organisations. Any one who has seriously studied the population literature - as this author has been doing almost daily for eight years - can but be struck by the amazing (and ultimately boring) similitude of analysis, concepts, language, in hundreds of publications. The stage was set for 1974 - World Population Year.

Some misinformed radicals have seen a worldwide "conspiracy" in all these developments. This strikes me as somewhat ridiculous. Everything has happened in a very open, public manner. The facts are there for anyone - with time and funds - to analyse. That the rebirth of the neomalthusian movement started in the United States is normal, given the role this country assigned to itself after the Second World War as guardian of the West against communist subversion. That the intellectual monolithism of the Population Establishment was built up so rapidly and on such a world-wide scale is of no surprise either in a world of almost instantaneous communication. Today, scientific ideas catch on almost as easily as the hula-hoop, and travel as fast.

In the ideology of the neomalthusian movement - for clearly its contentions are more ideological than scientific, given the fact that they are refuted by numerous recent historical examples - in this ideology population becomes an independant variable (i.e. one that has a powerful force and influences other factors like employment, health, crime, etc., rather than the other way round). During the sixties, a growing number of "scientific" studies and prestigious individuals pinpointed "population" as the number one enemy of development. Quotes of this type could fill pages, but two will be enough: the very prestigious Pearson report, published at the end of the sixties, proclaimed that "no other phenomenon casts a darker shadow on the prospects for international development than the staggering growth of population". And the President of the World Bank, Robert McNamara, went on record as saying that: "To put it simply:
the greatest single obstacle to the economic and social advancement of the majority of the peoples in the underdeveloped world is rampant population growth."

But maybe this is just a bit **too** simple?

The "solution" to the "problem" became thus immediately apparent: population control (euphemistically named "family planning" - it sounds nicer). "Scientific" surveys had shown that most of the women in these countries were apparently eager to limit their families. So large scale programs, usually designed by Western experts who knew almost nothing of these countries save their luxury, air-conditioned villas, were designed to promote recently discovered, low cost contraceptives. When it appeared the women were not adopting these methods as rapidly as the surveys showed they should have done, more experts, better administrative methods; more surveys; and more efficient contraceptives, better mass communication programs were urged - and adopted. In some cases, programs were designed with the sole aim of getting women to adopt family planning without changing a single thing in their environment of dismal poverty, (as in an experiment run in the late sixties in Tegucigalpa). Experts were dropped via helicopter on unsuspecting Himalayan villages in Nepal (1970), Moslem women coerced into buses to have loops inserted without any explanations, (Tunisia, mid sixties) young women given contraceptive injections against their husband's will (various African countries).

The result?

Measured by the hopes and expectations of the neomalthusians in the mid sixties it is unquestionably a considerable - and costly - failure. A leading family planner stated in New York in 1964 that he expected the loop would "change the history of the world". World history has not changed much since then. Many people are much poorer, and getting geared up for the radical social and political changes the population controllers had hoped to avoid. There are hundreds of millions more people. In the countries where birth control **is** working (Taiwan, S. Korea, Malaysia, etc...) a growing number of specialists concede that the success has fairly little to do with the programs themselves, that people
would have adopted antinatalist measures all by themselves; in the countries where it is not working, like India and Pakistan, poverty is growingly recognized as the main obstacle. As pills do not create jobs and the governments apparently cannot, coercive measures are being increasingly suggested.

But on top of all that, the one country that has not used a single Western expert, roundly condemned Western theories, taken a road diametrically opposed to the one promoted by the neomalthusians, (social revolution and structural change leading to new antinatalist motivations and hence birth control, rather than birth control to prevent revolution) - China - is acknowledged as having largely solved the problem. Yet neomalthusians were writing of China as late as 1960, "China quite literally cannot feed more people... The greatest tragedy that China could suffer, at the present time, would be a reduction in her death rate.

We have watched Wong die, his agony past, by the side of the road... Millions are going to die in the same way. There can be no way out. These men and women boys and girls must starve as tragic sacrifices on the twin alters of uncontrolled human reproduction and uncontrolled abuse of the land's resources". (from W. Vogt, People, Challenge to Survival)

Today, China feeds a hundred million more people, well. Her death rate is the lowest of the large developing nations, by very far. Her land resources are being admirably exploited and will produce much more in a near future. Everyone in China is literate, has a job, a guaranteed minimum income (which migrant workers in the U.S. don't).

Clearly something was wrong (in the Western prophecies and the Western analysis) for China to have succeeded so admirably well.

It is rather interesting that not a single socialist country in the Third World considers that it has a "population explosion - or even a "population problem". Some of them have rudely upset malthusian theories by managing astonishing economic "take-offs" despite population growth rates of 3% per annum (Albania). Not content to do this, some are even vigorously encouraging population growth, despite already high
Clearly, the main "explosion" problem today is Western consumption, which implies a very distorted distribution of world resources. As someone with wide international experience in the field of population problems, I do not hesitate to write that the "population problem" - as traditionally defined in Western treatises on this issue - is the greatest red herring in the field of development. By stressing it in such a biased, simplistic manner, neomalthusian thinking has made the world lose twenty precious years in solving the number one development problem - which is poverty - * 

If twenty years ago India had undertaken massive structural changes, a real land reform, distributed services and resources more equally instead of trying to get illiterate women to adopt the rhythm method using colored beads, it would not be sterilising people at the rate of 63,000 in two weeks (a goal achieved not long ago in a much-touted "family planning festival"); it would not be admitting that a larger number of people are worse (not better) off than 15 years ago (cf. the Dandekar study on poverty in India). At the root of India's population problem is not "population" but an alliance of national and Western interests opposed to radical change.

Aaron Segal in his study "The Rich, the Poor and Population" has admirably summed up the real issues involved in the field of population: "The road back to population sanity involves a few simple, unpleasant truths. These are:
1. Fertility does not cause poverty, war, or social unrest although

* and hence an equal time in delaying a realistic approach to population.
it can, combined with other variables, contribute to any or all of these occurring.

2. Reducing fertility may leave the poor just as materially poor as before unless other kinds of assistance are provided and changes made.

3. The task of reducing fertility will have to be done by members of particular societies and outsiders can only play a marginal role.

4. The determinants of fertility at the individual, societal or global level are complex and mutually interdependent and the problem is not primarily one of bringing to bear the heavy artillery of post-coital contraceptives.

5. We had better find some more meaningful reasons for helping the poor than fear of what they may do to the rich if we really wish to eliminate poverty.

6. Trade, aid, immigration, income distribution, and maternal health may have as much or more to do with reducing fertility than furnishing contraceptives. For instance, if we want to help some countries reduce their fertility we might start in the U.S. by not recruiting a majority of their trained medical personnel to solve our own medical shortage; accept as permanent immigrants some of their unskilled young (much as Europe's population problems of the 19th century were partly relieved by the export of more than 50 million unskilled young persons to North and South America, Australia and elsewhere); give poor countries a chance to sell us cheap manufactured goods which are labor-intensive, especially products which depend on employment of women, and be willing to pay more for their agricultural exports. It would be helpful if the Population Mafia with their ample funds for publicity would mention some of these or other measures in their urgent messages to the American public and leaders.
7. We concern ourselves with the real causes of poverty within our own rich countries and not rely on birth control as a form of conservative social control.

8. We do not ask others to do what we say rather than what we do. Until rich societies themselves adopt and take seriously population control policies they should lay off advising poor countries to do so. Instead they should wait for governments to take the initiative and keep external population inputs limited. The Chinese are in a better position, morally and materially, to convince Africans to take population problems seriously than we are.

9. We abandon the pursuit of coercive means of birth control. If we cannot, at home or abroad, help create conditions in which individuals will want to voluntarily reduce their fertility then we have no moral right to coerce.

10. We re-examine our own immigration policies so that we reduce the damage we are doing to poor countries through the brain drain. This primarily means creation of incentives to encourage the skilled to return to their home-countries, enjoying regular opportunities to go abroad. Where possible (e.g. US in respect of the Caribbean and European Economic Community in respect of North Africa), we should pursue immigration policies permitting a regular permanent, legal immigration of young unskilled persons and their families rather than the present illegal and temporary male migrant patterns."

If the World Population Conference to be held in Bucarest in August 1974 does not face these problems of world poverty - and many people desperately want to avoid them - it will be an utter waste of time and money and efforts. This must be stated clearly and forcefully.
Simply the publicity pages of the Sunday edition of the New York Times magazine consume enough paper to print all the school books in the African state of Cameroon. Yet, we prefer using these pages to peddle the 57th make of whiskey, cigarettes which are an acknowledged health risk, cars that pollute our streets and distort our urban planning, cosmetics that perfume our vanity, sick "porno" movies that distort our vision of love, "defensive" weapons that deepen our fears, rather than scale down our consumer hubris to more modest proportions - which, incidentally, would enable us both to start tackling problems of quality in our Babylonian citadels and have more resources to pay the raw materials of the poor countries at decent prices. A full page ad for the 1974 Pontiac in the October 1973 issue of Ebony magazine (USA) read: "Obviously, we are out to make you dissatisfied with whatever you have".

What a ferocious irony in that word, "obviously"! The rich countries economic system (because the USSR is closely following on our tracks) acknowledging that its aim is to create dissatisfaction while a berber tribe in N. Mali is reduced from 8,000 to 16 (sixteen) people in 5 months because we are too busy slimming excess weight due to overeating and over indulgence.

The basic motivation behind the Western drive to "control" the population of the Third World is fear. There are many others, of course, including a few authentic humanitarian ones and quite a few smelling of Victorian charity. The text of Paul Ehrlich reprinted elsewhere in this issue illustrates this fear quite clearly. It comes out in the language used daily to describe the rising world population: "The anthills of the Caribbean" (Le Figaro, Paris). The "rampant rate of reproduction", of the Third World countries, the "staggering" rates of population growth, etc. Graphs depict the burgeoning population as a Hiroshima like A-bomb cloud, and even such superb scientists as
Nobel-prize winner Norman Borlaug can write about staring over his shoulder at the "relentless frightening advance of the population monster". Speaking of the Indians, he even writes about "the population monster growling (sic) behind them".

In my whole life, I have never seen a population monster. As I look over my shoulder at West Africa, where I recently lived, I hear silence rather than "growling", the silence of the Berber tribe from N. Mali who between January and May 1973 were reduced by drought and famine from 8,000 to 16. Today, it may well be that not one single one is left. Twice before that, the Malian minister of Agriculture, Sidi Coulibaly, had been to Europe to alert Western governments and institutions about the impending disaster. Nobody took him seriously. The Africans were just far-away statistics.

Yet in all this talk about population, it seems that one fairly basic truth has been forgotten: population refers to people. If we claim that there are too many people on earth, then are we so sure we are not the excess ones? We Westerners who individually consume and pollute as much as fifty or more African peasants? In all my years in the field of population, I have never once heard a member of the Population Establishment say there were too many upper-middle class white anglo-saxon protestants in the world (they form the original "core" of the neo-malthusian movement), but two such people have openly told me there were too many blacks, and countless others have implied this, be it in their writings or conversations.

Yet fearful attitudes have never helped build a better world. Fear has never built cathedrals, or empires, created art, fed the poor, opened the doors of prisons, cared for those in need, started revolutions - and there are many types of these. Fear of people still less than all the others.

We live in a world of growing economic, social and political interdependancy, (as the so-called "energy crisis" has only too aptly shown). One of the greatest dangers of today are parochial, selfish, ethnocentric attitudes which blind us to the realities of the world.
Ultimately, our fate is bound to that of the Bengali rickshaw driver or Congolese peasant woman as much as to our own job or country. We forget this at our own peril.

We need a broader, clearer vision. We need to see people as infinitely precious, infinitely beautiful, and not in terms of "negative dependency ratios", "frightening growth rates", and other similar heartless expressions. Are we afraid of our mother, or child, or neighbor, or husband? Then why are we afraid of Mohamed, Vijeya, Liu or Carita?

In the world of Genesis, Cain could say about Abel, "Am I the guardian of my brother" and at least hope to get away with it. In today's world of globalised economies and thinking, the Western Cains can no longer say the same. Today, Cain will have to learn that he can only guard himself if he guards his brother. The future of humanity rests upon this realisation more than any other one.

The cement of a higher humanity must unite mankind in a higher vision of its common destiny. If we want to survive, clearer vision and greater compassion, not better pills, is what is most urgently needed.