
LIVING WITHIN LIMITS

*Ecology, Economics, and
Population Taboos*

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The Challenge of Limits

A funny thing happened on the way to the second nationwide Earth Day in 1990. Twenty years earlier the first Earth Day had been saluted with much talk about population problems. At that time world population stood at 3.6 billion. But when the second Earth Day rolled around, the topic of population was almost completely ignored. Was that because world population had stopped growing? Hardly: in the intervening two decades it had increased 47 percent to an estimated 5.3 billion—an increase of 1.7 billion (more than six times the present population of the United States).

Common sense tells us that the per capita share of environmental riches must decrease as population numbers increase, and waste disposal necessarily becomes an ever greater problem. Of course common sense is sometimes wrong. But if that is so in this instance, the celebrants of the 1990 Earth Day should have been shouting, “We’ve found the secret of perpetual growth!” A few incurable optimists did defend this position, but most people lumped their claims with those of the flat earthers, ignoring both. The celebrants were generally silent about the 47 percent increase in population. Why?

The answer comes in two parts, the first being historical. It is now known that the planners of Earth Day 1990 were under economic pressure to leave population out of the picture. When directors of philanthropic foundations and business concerns were solicited for financial support they let it be known that they would not look kindly on a population emphasis. Money talks, silence can be bought. (Why the bankrollers shied at population will become clear later.)

The second aspect of the answer is more subtle. It has long been recognized that some of our most deeply held views are not neat, precise propositions but broadly “global” attitudes that act as the gatekeepers of the mind, letting in only those propositions that do not challenge the dominant picture of reality. Germans call such gatekeeper attitudes *Weltanschauungen*, an impressive mouthful that is quite adequately translated as “worldviews.” For all but the last few hundred years of human history the dominant worldview was a limited view: resources were limited, human nature was fixed, and spending beyond one’s income was a sin. This essentially conservative perception prevailed until about 1600.

Then science and technology shook the foundations. One presumed limit after another was shown to be, in part, false. Age-old justifications for conservative, thrifty action were questioned. In our century the new spirit was deftly captured in the advertisement of an airline: “Fly now, pay later!” Since man, an optimistic ani-

mal, usually presumes that “we” will be richer later, conservatism was redefined as living on credit cards. In the public mind the limited worldview was replaced by a limitless worldview. The new orientation was intoxicating.

An effective gatekeeper of the mind does not call attention to itself. It actuates a psychological mechanism called a *taboo*. This South Sea island word was introduced into the English language by Captain Cook in 1777. That population discussions have been significantly hemmed in by taboo from Cook’s time to the present can be easily demonstrated. Ten years before the English word was created, the Scottish economist Sir James Steuart, after attributing poverty to overpopulation, ended by confessing: “How to propose a remedy for this inconveniency, without laying some restraint upon marriage; how to lay a restraint upon marriage without shocking the spirit of the times, I own I cannot find out; so I leave every one to conjecture.” Thomas Robert Malthus, who really got the population debate off the ground in 1798, was only a year old when Steuart thus bowed to the power of taboo.

The population taboo, while far from absolute, is still with us, as is illustrated by two examples from among many. In 1980 *Newsweek* published a 2,600-word essay on “Vanishing Forests,” in which not a single word was said about the role of population growth in causing worldwide deforestation. In 1989 *The New Yorker* published a 26,000-word extract of an environmentalist book *The End of Nature* which included only seventy-nine guarded words on population.

An element of behavior that is transferred from one culture to another is likely to suffer a sea change. So it has been with taboo. Pacific islanders apparently have no hesitancy in explicitly giving taboo as a reason for stopping a discussion. By contrast, Westerners, with their cherished tradition of free speech and open discussion, would be embarrassed to say (for instance), “We will not discuss population because it is under a taboo.” Instead, they change the subject. Hundreds of articles are written every year about the pathological effects of overpopulation—traffic congestion, deforestation, loss of species, soil erosion, and air pollution—without any mention of population growth as an essential cause.

In the United States in the middle of the 1980s the practical issue of population control became entangled with the moral issue of abortion. This is somewhat puzzling because there is no *necessary* connection between the two. Limiting population growth is easier to achieve when abortion is readily available, but population control is quite possible in a nation that prohibits abortion. A thorough political history of this entanglement is yet to be written, but it is safe to say that, beginning about 1980, abortion became a red herring that was deliberately dragged across the path of nearly every discussion of population. Since abortion, a tabooed topic only three decades earlier, was still regarded as indecent by millions of Americans, the topic of population control got tarred with the same brush.

But this has been a late development. In the first century after Malthus resistance to discussing population control came from other sources, principally from the social pioneers who were reshaping European culture into a more humane one. Reformers who were trying to persuade society to deal compassionately with children, women, and poor people often considered population a distraction.

Earlier, the principal supporters of population studies had been economists. Malthus, the first British professor of economics (then called “political economy”), pioneered in emphasizing the connection between economics and population.

John Stuart Mill kept the connection alive in the 1850s, but by the centennial of Steuart's statement the subject of population had virtually disappeared from the discipline of economics. Now, after yet another century, the topic is still missing from most economics textbooks.

Marxists have confidently asserted that the advance of technology, coupled with distributional justice, would automatically solve all problems mistakenly labeled "population." A similar conclusion was reached in the capitalist world, where the spirit of laissez-faire was invoked to generate a theory of automatic (and nearly painless) population regulation. The theory of "benign demographic transition" and the "child survival hypothesis" (to be discussed later) have, in effect, told people "Not to worry!" So ambiguous is statistical evidence that both of these optimistic theories of automatic population control survived nearly half a century before being abandoned by professionals. (They still persist on college campuses and in the popular press.)

The "Don't worry" theories of population control amount to a reaffirmation of the religious idea of Providence. Professional publicists know there is always a good living to be made by catering to the public's craving for optimistic reports. Such behavior finds no justification in the attitude of the Buddha, expressed five centuries before Christ: "I teach only two things: the cause of human sorrow and the way to become free of it." The present work, though written by a non-Buddhist, proceeds along the Buddhist path—first to reveal the causes of human sorrow in population matters and then to uncover promising ways to free ourselves of the sorrow.

Hearing the Buddha's statement today many people think, "How depressing! Why accept such a pessimistic outlook on life?" But they are wrong: it is not a pessimistic view if we reword it in terms that are more familiar to our science-based society. Reworded: "Here's something that isn't working right. I want to fix it, but before I can do that I have to know exactly why it doesn't work right." One who looks for causes before seeking remedies should not be condemned as a pessimist. In general, a great deal of looking for causes must precede the finding of remedies.

A great source of shared sorrow comes to us these days from an environment that has been badly mistreated for many centuries. Describing and looking for remedies to this sorrow is the obligation of ecology. Though the science of ecology was named more than a century ago, the public scarcely became aware of it until Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published in 1962. Since then an avalanche of discouraging reports on the environment has engulfed the public.

Broadly stated, most ecological problems reduce to the single problem of balancing supply and demand. That may sound simple enough, but the two words *supply* and *demand* stand for utterly disparate things. Supply is strictly limited, though we often cannot state the limits with any precision. Demand, however, is essentially unlimited, because the word implies *demands made by human beings*. There is no intrinsic limit to the demands that can be made by people. The natural tendency to produce an imbalance between supply and demand is the source of Buddhistic "sorrow." Preventing, or at least minimizing, this sorrow requires solving the population problem. Such was Malthus's view; and such must ours be.

Two centuries of intermittent wrestling with population problems have produced useful insights about the reality and nature of limits, the meaning of progress, the properties of exponential growth, the utility of usury, scale effects, and the con-

sequences of diminishing returns. Enlightenment has come from many quarters, not least from the engineering theory of controls. Journalists hanker after simple, one-paragraph answers to the threat of overpopulation: unfortunately there is no persuasive brief answer. However I think we can now see the *form* that acceptable answers must take. These are summarized in the concluding chapter.

Four centuries of sedation by the delusion of limitlessness have left humanity floundering in a wilderness of rhetoric. The history of population theories is a history of wishful thinking. By myriads of ruses hucksters have tried to divert attention from the conservation principles of science, implying that to accept the reality of limits is to become a pessimist.

But scientists are not saddened by conservation laws. Instead they agree with an aphorism attributed to Hegel: "Freedom is the recognition of necessity." From this it must be inferred that some day political conservatism will once again be defined as contented living within limits. The limitless world view will have to be abandoned. Before we can accept this necessity we must rid ourselves of many illusions that have in the past supported unworkable theories of population growth. To these we now turn our attention.