

# A Culture of Control:

The Cultural Aspects of the Population Control Crisis

And Western Values Embodied in Overpopulation

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The medical system of our Western world has taken a great deal of conditions and described them as diseases. This process of *medicalization* has created such diseases as obesity, aging, and attention deficit disorder, just to name a few. Those whom Western medicine categorizes as having these diseases are forced to bear the label of their illness and the stigma that such a label brings with it. Within a social context, it is this very labeling that defines an illness. An illness is, first and foremost, “a means by which the symbolic context of the nature of social relationships is defined.”<sup>1</sup> That is, an illness, as distinct from a disease, is the way in which a person experiences their condition. Moreover, cultural values are reflected in what each culture classifies as a disease. The culture, furthermore, provides a context in which a person experiences their illness and defines the social relations of the person to others. Thus, when a person suffers from an illness, whatever it may be, they are symbolically conveying their social relationships with others. Since cultural values are wrapped up in the symbolic meanings of an illness that defines a person’s social relationships, it is no wonder that Western biomedicine has medicalized many conditions. Our society highly values slender and youthful individuals whom it has the ability to understand and control. Using “medicine as a metaphor for social relations<sup>2</sup>” society, therefore, places the label of a disease on anyone who is not able to fit its cultural values.

One may wonder, is it also possible for Western culture to impose its cultural values on non-Western peoples, through the medium of medicine? I would argue that through the exportation of Western biomedicine to other peoples, Western values indeed are exported to other nations. One may further wonder what impact this imposition of

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<sup>1</sup> Crandon-Malamud, Libbet, “Phantoms and Physicians: Social Change Through Medical Pluralism,” *The Anthropology of Medicine: From Culture to Method*, 1997, Bergin & Garvey, pg. 34.

Western values has on the peoples whose cultural values are being transformed. One such illness that the United States and other industrialized Western nations are attempting to export to other peoples is that of overpopulation and its treatment of population control. Those Western nations that support the population control programs, both at home and abroad, cloak the so-called overpopulation crisis and solutions to the “crisis” in the assumed certitude of Western biomedicine. The crisis of over-population is culturally constructed in terms of Western values and remains largely unexamined as far as its objective truthfulness. Therefore, when applied to non-Western societies, the label of “overpopulated” serves to stigmatize the society and its people as suffering from, what in Western ideas, is the inability to regulate their own family planning. This label opens the door for Western medical intervention to arrest the population growth in those places that the Western nations view as unable to handle their own reproductive concerns.

Before examining how Western medicine has imposed the values symbolically locked up in the medical label of “overpopulated,” it is essential to understand what these values are and how they pervade Western, and especially American, culture. According to the Population Council of the World Bank, one of the major international proponents of government planned and executed population control, “rapid population growth in the developing nations emerged as *a social problem of magnitude* only after World War II.<sup>3</sup>” It was at this point that many international groups began to focus on this “social problem” and ways to go about dealing with it. Since that time a great deal of studies have been done by many organizations, such as the World Bank and International Planned

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 33.

Parenthood Federation, and nations, such as the United States, to improve the “treatment” of the “social problem,” or illness, of overpopulation.

According to those who promote population control, the problems with overpopulation are many and very serious. They allege that the earth only has a finite or limited amount of resources. In addition, they point to the fact that world population is on the rise, and rising more rapidly now than at any other time during the course of human history. In light of these premises, they conclude that the population will reach a peak at which the earth will no longer be able to support human life. They equate this to the carrying capacity of the land – the well-documented ecological precept defined “as the maximum stable population size that a particular environment can support over a relatively long period of time.”<sup>4</sup> It is this precept that has been used by such authors as Kenneth Boulding, Isaac Asimov and Garrett Hardin to equate the earth to a “spaceship” or a “lifeboat.” They claim that the fixed quantity of resources on earth will be exhausted, causing the cessation of support for human life.<sup>5</sup>

Few, however, have questioned whether or not overpopulation really is a problem. It is at this point that one finds a great deal of controversy over the population control issue. Many contest that the data that those in favour of population control report, such as the rapidly increasing population, the supposed failure of food production rates to keep up with population rates, or changes in fertility, rely on misleading statistics.<sup>6</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>3</sup> Berelson, Bernard, Foreword to *Experiments in Family Planning*, 1977, The World Bank, pg. vii. (Italics mine).

<sup>4</sup> Campbell, Neil A., *Biology: Fourth Edition*, 1996, The Benjamin/Cummings Publishing Company, pg. 1106.

<sup>5</sup> Boulding, Kenneth B., “The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth,” *Environmental Quality in a Growing Economy*, Johns Hopkins, 1966, pp. 3-14. Asimov, Isaac, *Earth, Our Crowded Spaceship*, 1974, John Day. Hardin, Garret, “Living on a Lifeboat,” *BioScience*, October 1974, pp. 16-23.

<sup>6</sup> Bauer, Peter T. and Yamey, Basil S., “The Third World and the West: An Economic Perspective,” *The Third World: Premises of U.S. Policy*, 1978, Institute for Contemporary Studies, pg. 108.

many economists, including Oxford's Colin Clark and Princeton's Julian Simon, have demonstrated that population growth is economically beneficial.<sup>7</sup> These economists hold that the model of earth as a "lifeboat," with its limited supply of resources that are being exhausted, is a flawed way to look at resources. They do not claim that the world has an infinite supply of resources, but rather they maintain that the market economy – individual actors making their own decisions without central planning – has dealt with the world's scarce resources, which have always been and always will be scarce. They hold that individuals will find new and innovative ways to deal with the scarcity of our resources. This, however, I feel, fails to recognize the paramount element of human nature as seen by anthropology: culture.

Humans, unlike other animals, live in culture and are cultural beings. Culture makes it possible for humankind to alter our own environment, and to develop and convey to others novel new ways of dealing with problems. The ability to change the environment means that humankind can also alter the carrying capacity of the earth for ourselves. The ability to control our environment has allowed human populations to grow in number and survive in new places. For example, the rise in population in certain areas caused the people there to adapt culturally, by gradually shifting from a hunter-gather society to an agricultural society several thousand years ago.<sup>8</sup> This, in turn, allowed the agricultural societies to support even larger populations. Similar changes in population are correlated to other major changes in human progress, such as urbanization and industrialization. While the market mechanism for dealing with changes in population described by Clark, Simon, and others may be one part of the correct solution to a rising population, it seems

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<sup>7</sup> Kasun, Jacqueline, *The War Against Population*, 1988, Ignatius Press, pg. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Fagan, Brian M., *People of the Earth: An Introduction to World Prehistory*, 9<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1998, Longman.

to me that the solution is wider than this. Humankind's ability to alter our environment, utilize our scarce resources, and develop new ways to deal with increased numbers of people is not only less pessimistic about the future of humankind than those who advocate population control would have us believe, but these factors also abate the idea that population growth is a problem, and rather it is one of many conditions that leads to cultural response. This understanding of many possible cultural responses to the same conditions is one that is well understood by anthropologists.

While it may be a Western response to growing population to seek to limit the population, it is, however, not the only culturally acceptable response. In fact, as we have seen, the response to limit the population is not even one where "agreement has been reached among informed groups [in Western culture as to whether or not] the problem of overpopulation even exists."<sup>9</sup> It is the case, however, that the majority of Americans see overpopulation as a general and serious social illness that needs to be remedied. In *The War Against Population* Jacqueline Kasun argues that the primary reason for the pervasiveness of the overpopulation myth in America is the propaganda that has permeated American life at all levels: from the highest reaches of the Federal bureaucracy, to the chronic reporting of overpopulation problems by the media and the federally-funded population propaganda campaign in the public schools that indoctrinated a generation of children.<sup>10</sup>

Kasun continues to argue that the *antinatal* sentiment in America is due to a long cultural history of an American value: the spirit to be the best. She argues that this sense of superiority has led Americans to be some of the most receptive to the ideas of Herbert

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<sup>9</sup> Kasun, pg. 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 22.

Spenser, William Sumner, Sir Francis Galton, and Karl Pearson. These people took the works of Malthus, Darwin and others and formulated the principles of Social Darwinism and, later, eugenics (the study of how to purify or improve a race or species). Social Darwinism went beyond Adam Smith and Charles Darwin's notions of competition, and formulated the belief that competition was good because it was a mechanism to eliminate the unfit. Eugenics provided the intellectual base that allowed the State of Indiana to have the first forced sterilization program in the world<sup>11</sup> and the presidents of both Harvard and Stanford Universities to found a group, whose goals included the "prevention of the propagation of the unfit."<sup>12</sup> Kasun explains how many of those who were involved in the eugenics movements of the 1930's in America went on to have a profound influence on American politicians and private organizations, such as Planned Parenthood. It is the legacy of these 'intellectual' movements of Social Darwinism and eugenics that Kasun argues gives rise to the antinatal sentiments in America.<sup>13</sup>

Now that it has been sketched how the supposed overpopulation crisis rests on the pervasive antinatal values in American society and a pessimistic attitude towards the ability of humans to adapt their environment and themselves in order to survive, one can better address the population control issue. Specifically, how these values and the social relations they imply, are imposed upon other peoples, through the medium of Western biomedicine.

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<sup>11</sup> Chase, Allan, *The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism*, 1977, Knopf, pp. 15-16

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Kasun, pp. 157-163.

As mentioned before, a great many private organizations and nations have done research in order to improve their methods of treating the supposed social illness of overpopulation. It is interesting to look at some of these methods, keeping in mind several of the precepts regarding the Western cultural basis of the assumed population crisis. Namely, look for ways in which one may see these population control programs selectively affecting those who many consider unfit. Look also at how several of the programs make the assumption that those people whom they are serving share the same values: antinatalism and pessimism towards humanity's ability to alter our environment and create new cultural ways of dealing with increased population.

The 1970s were the years in which the United States participated in the greatest number of controversial population control methods. Many of these programs are still in effect, while others have changed slightly, as new methods have become available. The United States is heavily engrossed in the population control programs, having spent more than all other nations combined since 1965 on foreign population control programs.<sup>14</sup> The motivation of the foreign population control programs of the United States is evident in the nation's stated desire to "build motivation for smaller families through modification of economic and social conditions supportive of the desire for large families."<sup>15</sup> The motivation for the population control programs is to be able to gain greater control over those nations, economically and socially.

Nowhere is this desire for economic control more evident than in the stipulations that the United States places on a great deal of its foreign aid, generally including population

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79.

<sup>15</sup> International Development and Food Assistance Act of 1978, Section 104(d).

control clauses. One of the more striking examples was in 1966 when India was suffering from a famine. President Johnson refused to release wheat to the nation until the “Indian government first agreed to mount a massive birth control program. The Indian government finally moved and [President] Johnson released the wheat over a sufficiently extended period to make certain the birth control program was off the ground.<sup>16</sup>” This example of the United States placing stringent population control requirements on much needed humanitarian aid is not only limited to India, but has happened in much of South America and Africa as well. Those who are the “patients” of these population control programs are often antagonistic towards the intervention that the United States is making into their lives. “There is some anger with an America that can interfere with Indian affairs because of financial power.<sup>17</sup>” This has led to a large anti-American sentiment in many of these nations.

The programs, however, do not all apply only to nations, nor are there always negative repercussions of participation in the population control programs. Many of the programs provide incentives and rewards in seeking to “modify the economic and social conditions to be supportive of smaller families.” In India, the villagers “were offered cash payments on condition that 75 percent of all men in the village submit to vasectomy,<sup>18</sup>” “many of whom were told, falsely, that vasectomy is easily and certainly reversible.<sup>19</sup>” In Indonesia, where this so called “village system” of population first began, “the government provides group rewards, consisting of increased food supplements, health

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<sup>16</sup> Califano, Joseph, *Governing America*, 1981, Simon & Schuster, pg. 52.

<sup>17</sup> Pohlman, Edward, *How to Kill a Population*, 1971, The Westminister Press, pg. 135.

<sup>18</sup> Veatch, Robert M., “Governmental Population Incentives: Ethical Issues at Stake,” *Studies in Family Planning*, April 1977, pp. 100-108.

<sup>19</sup> Pohlman, pg. 138.

services and other benefits, to villages that reach the targets.<sup>20</sup>” In Thailand, the government suffered economic hardships beginning in 1958 until 1968, when the World Bank finally agreed to give them loans, since the Thai government had adopted a population control program.<sup>21</sup> What this demonstrates is that while the United States does not force sterilizations or birth control onto people, they provide incentives that pressure many nations and individuals to undergo “treatment” for overpopulation – much of it unwanted or misunderstood treatment. Local governments, private organizations, such as Planned Parenthood, and international organizations, such as the World Bank indirectly apply much of the pressure for the United States’ sponsored population control programs.

Clearly, all of these programs are set up in such a way that it is the uninformed, the poor and the lower class that are coerced to accept the conditions of population control. In his book, *Incentives and Compensations in Birth Planning*, Edward Pohlman argues that one of the advantages to the incentive payment programs is that the sterilization is eugenic. Because money is more valuable to poor people, incentives may have their greatest impact on birth rates in the lower classes.<sup>22</sup> When this was published in 1971, Pohlman urged the governments of the world to look to the incentive program to reduce the fertility of the lower classes, the poor and the uneducated. An educated person, for example, would know that a vasectomy is not a reversible process. A wealthy person would have no reason to need to assent to birth control, unless they wanted to, for the incentives of food and health benefits would not mean as much to them as to the poorer

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<sup>20</sup> The Population Council, *Studies in Family Planning*, September 1978, pg. 70.

<sup>21</sup> Kasun, pg. 87.

<sup>22</sup> Pohlman, Edward, *Incentives and Compensations in Birth Planning*, 1971, University of North Carolina Population Center, pg. 5.

people. In those systems, such as India, where 75 percent of the men needed to be sterilized in order for the village to benefit, it will be the lower classes, not the upper or privileged classes, that will suffer the coerced sterilizations.

Thus far, only those programs that actually are population control programs have been presented. This is primarily since the “problem of overpopulation” is concerned with reducing the number of people on the earth or at least slowing the rate at which the population is increasing. Those birth control programs that are offered to women and men who wish to regulate their own family planning are a totally different story, or so it seems. In the optional birth control programs, birth control medication and information are made available to couples who wish to space their children, or delay the birth of a child until they are established. The problem is that, like the propaganda campaign in the United States and in other Western nations, the birth control is not just made available to people. They are told by their doctors, their governments, the media, and other sources that the world population is too large and that they should do their part to reduce the rate at which humankind is, supposedly, exhausting the resources of the world. Even the seemingly harmless act of providing birth control to those couples who wish to exercise control over their own family planning is, like all medical methods, full of the values of the medical system that affect the social system. In this way, not only are those people who are coerced into being sterilized having Western values imposed upon them, but so are those who seek to plan their own families, using Western biomedicine.

This use of Western biomedicine, and all the health advantages that it brings with it to non-Western societies is also bringing disadvantages. The Western values, including

those that are antinatal and pessimistic about humankind's future are symbolically locked up with the use of Western medicine. The United States and other nations and organizations, pressure their values, as well as the economic interests upon a great deal of people as the non-Western societies adopt certain aspects of Western biomedicine. It is primarily through the West's culturally constructed illness of overpopulation and the prescribed treatment through population control that the values and economic concerns of the United States are forced upon non-Western societies. This forcing of values is also discriminates by class, income and educational level – selectively placing the burden on those who are the lowest class, those who are the poorest and those who are the least educated. It is in this way that the United States, through its partners in private and international organizations, is able to carry out eugenics projects on a grand scale, all under the guise of population control “for the good of the species.”