

THE POLITICS OF REPRODUCTION AND POPULATION CONTROL

Sharon Stephens

The decade of the 90s, many have argued, will be known as 'the environment decade.' Environmental language pervades not only alternative movements, but also the official proclamations of states, multinational corporations and international organisations like the United Nations, UNICEF and the World Bank. While the increasing centrality of environmentalist claims—at least partly the result of increasing public concerns about the deteriorating quality of our everyday environments—opens up new possibilities for effective political action, it also brings new dangers. The 'transparent wisdom' of environmental rhetoric can also be used to legitimize new forms of social repression and control.

It is put forth as common sense environmental wisdom, for example, that "the responsible planning of births is one of the most effective and least expensive ways of improving the quality of life on earth"—of reducing human demands on an increasingly overburdened earth, while also improving the quality of women's lives, child care, family life and education and contributing to social and economic progress. (These official statements, from UNICEF'S 1992 report on "The State of the World's Children," are representative of many others.) Effective population policies, the argument goes, give people more control over the everyday conditions of their lives, while also easing global environmental pressures.

Unfortunately, Third World population reduction programs have often had very little to do with increasing poor women's control over their lives. In First World countries, the rhetoric of individual 'reproductive choice' obscures how narrowly defined the life choices of many women (and men) actually are.

These issues are boldly addressed in the Action Agenda drafted by the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet, November 8-12, 1991 (reported in *Klassekampen*, 29 Nov., 1991). In the section on 'Women's Rights and Population Policies,' the authors affirm that the major causes of environmental degradation are 'industrial and military pollutants, toxic wastes and economic systems that exploit and misuse nature and people.' They continue: "We are outraged by suggestions that women's fertility rates (euphemistically called population pressures) are to blame." Forms of 'common sense environ-

mental wisdom' that see environmental problems simply in terms of numbers of people putting pressures on limited environmental resources open the way for top-down population policies that threaten human rights and restrict, rather than expand, people's control over the conditions of their lives. The Action Agenda emphasizes that it is the number of people living particular lives, consuming resources and generating wastes in specific ways, that determines environmental impact. There is nothing profoundly new in stating that a person living in the privileged sectors of the industrialised world has a far greater negative impact on the environment than a person living in a poor country (or in the swelling ranks of the First World poor). Unfortunately, there is also nothing new in the fact that the most coercive programs are among the poor—for example, the testing of newly-developed Norplant contraceptive implants in rural populations in Egypt and Brazil without the informed consent of the 'acceptor populations.' (In these cases, program aims included not only the reduction of 'excess populations' in the Third World, but also the production of scientific data necessary to develop reproductive technologies for marketing to individuals in the First World.

How a society organizes its reproductive decisions, technologies and policies has a great deal to do with the sorts of persons it wants to produce, the sorts it wants to be rid of, and the kind of society it wants to produce, the sorts it wants to be rid of, and the kind of society it wants to maintain and develop—in other words, with politics and not a politically neutral environmental logic. The current global 'Politics of Reproduction' was the topic of a conference (organised by the American Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research) that I attended in November 1992 in Teresopolis, Brazil.

Twenty-three participants from around the world came together for a week to discuss the ways that seemingly distant global power relations shape and constrain local reproductive experiences and decisions. Topic ranged from the effects of introducing Western medical practices into non-Western contexts (resulting, for example in the outlawing by British colonial powers of the Egyptian 'birthing chair,' only to return as folk wisdom among present-day upper classes in Britain returning to 'natural childbirth'), to the impact of new reproductive technologies on conventional family relations (profoundly challenged by a world where a woman can give birth to the genetic offspring of her own daughter), to international flows of adoptive babies and child care workers and

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to social movements focusing directly on reproductive issues like abortion rights and sterilisation abuse. Here I note the conference presentations with the most striking implications for our understandings of current population policies, 'transparent environmental wisdom,' and new forms of political control.

Ann Anagnost, an American social anthropologist from the University of Washington, discussed her research on China's stringent one-birth policy, which makes strikingly clear that state discourses on 'overpopulation' are not just about reducing human demands on overburdened environments. Anagnost had gone to China to study recent transformations in local village politics, but changed her focus when she found that, over and over again, it was China's one birth policy that people wanted to discuss, defend, and occasionally obliquely criticize. People expressed to her their pain and sense of profound loss at being limited to one child, even as they emphasized the enlightened rationality of current programs, involving large fines, social stigmatization and sometimes coerced abortions for non-complying families.

Inasmuch as China's birth rate had been going down even before the current policy was implemented, we must ask, what else is going on here? Why did the state demand such a drastic and rapid reduction in China's 'excess population?' According to Anagnost, part of the answer lies in the current intense state concern that China should attain its 'proper place in the world.' Achieving this goal demands that China drastically reduce those traits perceived as impeding progress and development—the backwardness, peasant mentality and inflexible traditions associated with its 'excess population.'

China's current population policy is aimed not only at reducing numbers of people, but at transforming the sorts of persons who are produced. While the official explanation for the one-birth policy is to reduce demands on a dangerously overburdened environment, many people also told Anagnost that such a policy was important because it is not possible to nurture more than one child to the level of 'quality' necessary to make 'progress' in the present world. State policies have led to tremendous parental investments in the one allowable child, often fed special foods believed to raise intelligence and supplied with special toys designed specifically to 'open up' the child's mind, to make it more active, flexible and creative. (In this, China is following Japan and other rapidly modernizing countries, where children are under enormous pressure to become consumers at very early ages of an increasingly commoditized childhood, in order to develop the requisite capacities for success in adult society.)

In patriarchal China, where the one birth policy aims at locating all parental hopes for the future in the body of one small child, there are also strong pressures for that

one child to be male. It is no accident that the first pre-natal sex selection technologies were developed in China. It is at least conceivable that future Chinese society will be differentiated into upper classes of elite families producing male children, with lower classes 'strongly encouraged' to produce the female bearers of elite sons.

For Anagnost, China's stringent one-birth policy has a great deal to do with state desires to re-tailor the Chinese population for central participation in the current world market, not as mass reserves of unskilled laborers (the role of 'backward, undeveloped countries'), but as central players (a vision that draws on centuries of Chinese dynastic ambitions). China's current population policy—aimed at increasing 'quality' while decreasing 'quantity'—can be read as one dramatic consequence of China's turning away from the socialist dreams of its past and turning towards the capitalist world market. When Anagnost asked a local Party secretary about a blind peasant child, who spent days by herself, sitting alone, with no social programs to help her, the secretary responded: "We have no use today in China for people who can't care for themselves and who make no contribution to national progress." In China, there is essentially no longer any health care program for peasants. Instead, birth control, coerced abortion and the production of 'quality children' are seen as the solutions to current social problems and as the means of economic progress. Anagnost describes widely reproduced charts outlining how many more commodities (refrigerators, stereos, etc.) ordinary people will be able to afford with every level of population reduction. Quality labor, Western commodities and economic progress are the promised fruits of China's 'environmentally rational' population program.

Anagnost's discussion of China's one birth policy resonates in remarkable ways with the work of another conference participant, Emily Martin (a social anthropologist from Johns Hopkins University). Martin's research focuses on America's new 'nurturant corporations'—"leaner, more flexible corporations" that frequently portray themselves as new sorts of 'families', giving birth to 'new persons.' These corporations differ greatly from earlier capitalist enterprises, in which working masses were seen as interchangeable and disposable, as bodies that could be used and used up in daily labor and that were expected to get their nurturance at home (where unpaid 'reproductive work' in the private sphere provided an invisible subsidy for 'productive work' in the public domain).

Now, Martin argues, the American home is increasingly penetrated and fragmented, with increases in two career families, young children in day-long care facilities, and the rise of small-scale corporations that become 'total institutions,' providing both work and leisure time opportunities for their employees to become more flexible,



creative and able to take risks. (Martin documents special workshops aimed at breaking down outmoded ways of thinking and developing people's capacities for creative risk-taking. A popular workshop involves getting corporation employees to jump off high poles attached to elastic cords, in order to open the way for entrepreneurial 'leaps into the beyond').

These corporations are engaged in what they call 'total quality management'—'TQM,' for short. The aim of these state-supported programs is to produce higher quality 'human capital' in order to increase American competitiveness in the rapidly changing global market.

But what of the others—the increasing numbers of 'excess' workers who are being laid off in the process of corporate restructuring? There are fewer and fewer social safety nets for these excess populations, many of whom live in conditions that resemble the worst situations in the 'underdeveloped world.' The Third World has come home to American inner cities. (In Harlem, a poor black section of New York, the rate of survival for men past the age of 40 is lower than in Bangladesh.) The deterioration of social services, at the same time that the new 'nurturant corporations' are receiving state support to give birth to new kinds of employees, indicates that the American state may be as interested as the Chinese in 'sloughing off' its excess, unproductive population and increasing the quality of those who remain, in order to produce flexible, multi-skilled workers capable of competing in the new global order. If such goals can be accomplished using the progressive language of environmental concern, so much the better.

The increasingly competitive economic situation has a great deal to do with the reproductive choices of many two career First World families. Today we hear frequently of the infertility problems of certain groups of women in industrialized countries—what *Time* magazine calls the current epidemic of infertility in the developed world (at least partly attributable, many suggest, to the career choices of women who postpone childbearing until ages when it is more difficult to conceive). While technologies of population control are developed to deal with the 'fertility problems' of the poor, a vast array of high-technology 'cures for infertility' are being developed to make possible the reproduction of privileged groups.

Many of our conference discussions centered on the nature of these new 'cures for infertility' and the extent to which they really increase women's choices. These technologies involve new modes of visually invading women's bodies (for example, sonogram fetal imagery techniques) and highly technical manipulations (such as in vitro fertilization), carried out in both inside and outside women's bodies by groups of scientific elites. We can recognize that these technologies have helped some women to have the children they desire, at the same time

that we question the social implications of technologies that increase possibilities for genetic screening, selection and manipulation. How do we imagine the 'perfect babies' promised by our new reproductive technologies? According to those visions, in whose interests, and for what ends will these new children be created? (In Europe and the US, lobby groups of variously disabled populations, those who might have been identified and 'screened out' by many currently available technologies, are beginning to protest the sorts of 'brave new worlds' being created in the increasingly manipulated bodies of our children).

In contrast to the language of 'individual choice' (and the often invisible machinery of social control connected to reproduction in the First World, social control is frequently all too apparent in Third World population programs. Carmen Barroso (a Brazilian social scientist now heading the MacArthur Foundation population research program in Chicago) discussed heated debates about the use of Norplant contraceptive technologies in Brazil. These devices, implants under the skin allowing regular release of contraceptive substances, are considered ideal for the poor, uneducated women who can't be counted on to take regular responsibility for their own 'fertility problems.' Such technologies figure prominently in the population control programs supported by international aid agencies and foundations (for example, the United Nations Population Fund, Intentional Planned Parenthood Federation, and United States Agency for International Development), who see population control as a crucial element in the structural re-adjustments called for within debt-ridden Third World countries.

Barroso told of the ultimately effective resistance to the Norplant program in rural Brazil—a resistance made possible by political coalitions of local women, Brazilian feminists and academics, some state officials and Catholic Church groups. One of the most serious charges against the program was that it bypassed procedures for 'informed consent' of Norplant-treated groups. The issue of informed consent becomes all the more serious, in the light of recent claims that Norplant substances may later alter a woman's body chemistry in such a way that she is more susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS. Nevertheless, Norplant technologies continue to be used in many Third World population programs, while scientific reports of possible dangers have been judged too preliminary and potentially alarmist for publication in major medical journals. The question must be asked whether the same degree of scientific caution would be in order if the primary recipients of Norplant technologies were not "excess populations" and generators of 'fertility problems.'

There is no easy road from 'common sense environmental wisdom' to politically acceptable population policies. To argue, for example, that 'responsible and effective family planning' will automatically improve people's lives, while



also saving the planet is at best naive—and very dangerous when such thinking becomes the basis for social policy. Simply having fewer children will not improve the lives of many poor women, for whom child-bearing remains a primary source of their value as people and for whom infant mortality is a daily reality (with surviving children being the only hedge against an uncertain future). Nor will simply reducing the number of people on the planet automatically save the environment, as long as we do not rethink the logic of a profit-driven world system that treats large populations as expendable, smaller chosen populations as ‘human capital,’ and the environment as something to be exploited in the interests of continued capital accumulation and concentration.

Debates about ‘environmental rationality,’ the means by which it should be implemented and its acceptable costs will intensify in times ahead. These issues will certainly be at the center of debates at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Brazil next June, where feminists will come up against hard-line environmentalists, advocates of technical solutions to environmental problems against those demanding radical social changes, representatives of Northern countries against those from the South. The challenge, for those concerned with both environmental quality and social justice, will be to develop effective population policies that treat women (and men) as subjects, rather than as the targets or objects of programs and services.

Letter

Dear Sirs,

I am encouraged by the appearance of a letter or two in your September '92 issue. So I venture to make this short offering.

“Ethno-nationalism” is referred to as a post-World War II phenomenon. It is much older. After 300 years of guerilla warfare it broke the British state into two in 1922, making its first triumphant 20th - century entry into the world-scene. Since then it has not looked back. Guerilla wars of national liberation have produced the states of Israel, Indonesia, Zaire, Kenya, Algeria, Viet-nam, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, Afghanistan and Eritrea. Bangladesh and The Turkish Cypriot Republic were helped on by powerful neighbours. No guerilla war of national liberation has failed to produce its separate state- those which have not done so as yet are still in progress. (Sudan, Philippines, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, India). It is to avoid this fatal prospect that the Soviet Union dissolved into separate independent states.

The closest parallel to the Eelam movement this century is the Zionist movement; the same militaristic rigour, the same worldwide diaspora lobbying internationally and funding from deep resources.

To believe that some constitutional tinkering will “solve the problem” is to take our leave of the realities of 20th century history. The problem to be “solved” lies not in the north-east of the island. It lies in the Sinhala psyche and in Sinhala ignorance of the realities of the situation.

I am, dear Sirs,
Yours heretically,

Adrian Wijemanne