

# Letters

## Family Planning and Other Population Controls

Since the article by Davis ["Population policy: Will current programs succeed?" (10 Nov., p. 730)] was abridged from a paper presented to the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences and since we constitute the Committee on Population of the Academy, it seems appropriate for us to comment on some of the issues involved.

We concur with much of what Davis says, including his observations that in the population field, current "action is a welcome relief from the long opposition, or timidity, which seemed to block forever any governmental attempt to restrain population growth" and that "on the face of it, one could hardly expect such a fundamental reorientation to be quickly and successfully implemented." We believe that certain of his observations about the present state of work throughout the world deserve a somewhat different emphasis and perspective.

A zero rate of population growth may be essential in the long run but as a goal within the time horizon of current policy it has little support in either the developing or the developed world, certainly not among governments. Before any action in this direction is taken, it will be necessary to develop some consensus in support of the goal itself. There is nothing in logic or in fact that requires the goal of a zero rate of increase for the near future on the part of people who favor "population control." Indeed, "ultimately" and "eventually" are far off, and the immediate task of high priority is to determine what can and should be done now.

We would agree that a broader range of measures needs to be explored for their potential contribution to the easing of population pressures, particularly in the developing countries where rapid population growth is especially threatening. But what should they be? Several of Davis' specific recommendations simply do not apply to the developing world, and others could not be put into effect there at this time. Indeed, as he acknowledges at the close of his article, "the specific measures for developing

such [attractive] substitutes [for family interests] are not easy to determine in the absence of research on the question."

Programs of social change must operate within the framework of existing values, and few governments are yet prepared to adopt stringent economic or social means to bring down birth rates. (If tried, they would probably be more likely to bring down the government!) The fact is that many governments in need of population policies do not appreciate their own situation and others with policies do not yet have strong and effective programs, so there is still a long way to go on this score alone.

We agree with Davis that "there is no reason to abandon family-planning programs." Certainly they are not the full or final answer to the problem of rapid population growth—on a matter of such magnitude, nothing is—but we are more impressed with their value and their contribution especially when we consider that the expediting of a latent trend is itself a worthy accomplishment, that the very extension of family planning may well create its own dynamic in fostering further acceptance, and that any slowing of population growth will help to achieve the modernization that will itself alter reproductive values in a favorable direction. In the intensely practical attempt to alleviate this monumental problem, we should not be persuaded by the argument that since what we can do will not do the whole job, we should abandon or diminish current efforts or turn to means whose promise is unclear.

We do agree that every effort should be made to develop additional policies that will support present family-planning programs. Such supplements need to be acceptable and workable within present and likely political, economic, and social realities but, as Davis properly argues, they need not require unquestioning acceptance of the status quo.

Many of his alternatives are unlikely to be approved in the visible future. In the meantime it is not clear to us that vigorous implementation of current programs is in conflict with the investigation and subsequent adoption of other

programs. We do not all need to agree on the ultimate requirements in order to take those early and practical steps that are supported by governmental and popular consensus. Any current contribution to reducing rates of population growth is surely desirable as an intermediate step toward a zero growth rate, as well as for its earlier impact upon social, economic, health, and personal values.

WILLIAM D. McELROY

BERNARD BERELSON, ANSLEY COALE

BENEDICT DUFFY, JR., KARL FOLKERS

RONALD FREEDMAN, SEYMOUR KETY

CLEMENT L. MARKERT, JOHN SNYDER

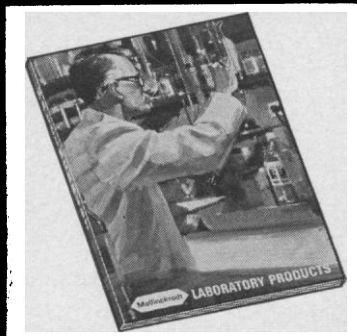
HOWARD TAYLOR

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While appreciating the committee's assents, I must nevertheless dispute not only its disagreements but also its self-designation as Academy spokesman. When it implies that it *must* speak out because it is *the* population committee of the Academy, I think it is dissembling. The presentation of papers at NRC meetings does not imply Academy endorsement and does not subject them, any more than papers read elsewhere, to Academy review. Scientific controversy is ordinarily conducted in terms of logic and evidence, but the committee has chosen to assert a presumed authority. Why does it not admit that it is injecting itself into the debate because of its close alliance with the policies being evaluated? Its own products—two popular, undocumented pamphlets on population growth in the United States and the world—were intended to bring the Academy's prestige to the support of family planning as the avenue to population control. This was not surprising, because the committee was funded by the Population Council, foremost advocate of family planning for population control, and the membership included the vice president (Berelson) and a consultant (Taylor) of the same organization, together with others (Freedman, Snyder) closely connected with the Council or with other family-planning programs.

In defending itself the committee marshals its forces, ambiguously, around acceptability. It seems to say that only those measures should be recommended that are acceptable. This is fine *if they are effective*, but I said that family planning, by its very character, does not provide societies with control over

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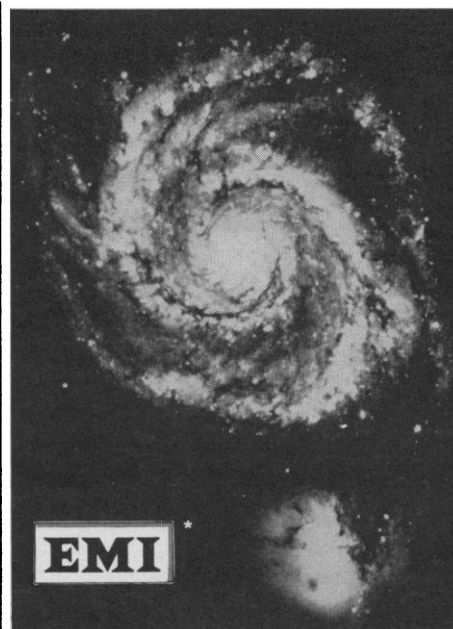
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population growth. At most it provides individuals with easier means of determining their family size. The committee skirts this challenge by inferring that the goal, too, must be acceptable. It thus conceives of population policy as simply a service function, providing means that people approve to give them what they want. This idyllic notion bears no relation to the problem of population growth about which the committee is presumably exercised. That problem implies a conflict between behavior and its consequences, and it is that conflict that population policy must resolve.

For clear thinking about population policy, the question of effectiveness must be separated from that of acceptability. Analysis of the effectiveness of policies (actual and potential) is the scientific part of the task. Its contribution, independent of acceptability, is precisely that it allows minds to break out of the tyranny of what is and think effectively of what can be. Even if it were true (as is not the case) that no people wants zero population growth, it would still be important, for population policy, that the goal be discussed and debated, and that the measures necessary to reach it be fully analyzed.

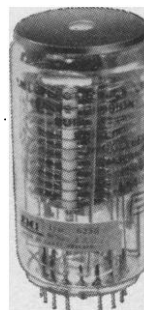
Given the difficulty of determining acceptance in advance, and the tendency to assume that absence is proof of disapproval, a preoccupation with acceptability encourages proposals that are *behind* public opinion. (No one predicted the popularity of sterilization in Puerto Rico or mass abortion in Japan.) It causes the range and power of potential policies to be underestimated, because they are dismissed rather than analyzed. It thus precludes the possibility of moving an effective measure from the unacceptable to the acceptable column. Reforms do not suddenly jump from being tabooed to being welcomed. They have to be advocated, exposed to view, debated, tried out, improved. Early advocates of contraception did not wait until contraception was "within the framework of existing values"; they had more courage than that, and more sense. "Existing values" are not the means for solving the problem; they are the problem itself. Since they give the motivation for sizable families, policies that "operate within" them will necessarily prove ineffective.

The conservative tenor of the committee's letter, like that of its two pamphlets, suggests again that the emphasis on family planning in current population policies provides an escape



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from consideration of the painful social and economic changes necessary to achieve fertility control. The common but mystical notion that family planning "provides its own dynamic" does nothing to lessen this impression.

KINGSLEY DAVIS

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### How Many Smokes per Flight?

I concur with Abelson's editorial (22 Dec., p. 1527), in which he expressed concern over the effects of smoking on air pollution and the infringement of the rights of nonsmokers. As a frequent airline passenger, I have experienced the initial stages of acute asphyxia resulting from too many people smoking in a poorly ventilated aircraft. I wonder whether the automatic devices to provide oxygen used in airplanes are sensitive to these environmental conditions as well as problems of altitude.

It may be necessary to provide special smoking sections, or smoking flights similar to the railroads' use of smoking cars. Certainly if individuals are unable to regulate their own activities, it may one day be necessary for the industry or government to regulate the number of smokes per flight.

JACK WERBOFF

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... The situation that most irks me, I think, is the airplane at meal time. Pressurized aircraft cabin ventilating systems are good. No matter how good they are, however, I have yet to experience one that can stay ahead of the smokers. When I am finishing a good airline meal and enjoying it, I frequently have to hold my breath for the last several bites because some nervous smoker close by has lighted a cigarette before finishing his or her meal, and spews smoke out into the restricted confines of the cabin. Ugh! ...

HENRY F. DOBYNS

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... Would someone explain to me the validity of my government using my tax money to support tobacco farmers whose product is detrimental to my health?

MARVIN R. TURNIPSEED

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23 FEBRUARY 1968

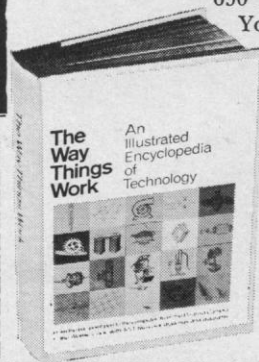
## How it works

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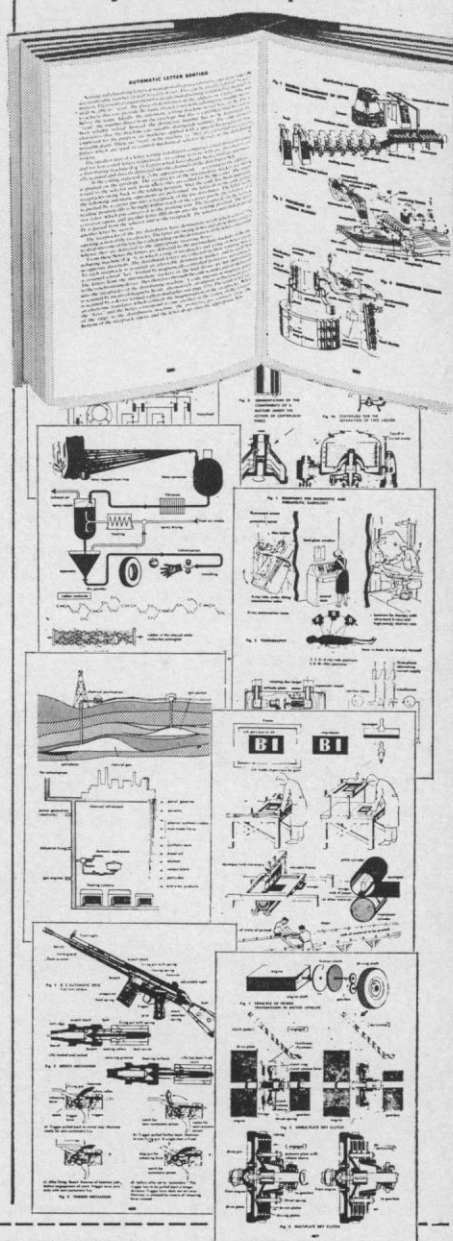
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