Regulating Human Fertility

Rapid Population Growth. Published for the National Academy of Sciences by Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1971. xiv, 696 pp., illus. $20.

Early in 1967 the directors of seven American population research centers agreed that the economic and social effects of rapid population growth were poorly understood, that assumptions about such effects were influencing the development of national policies and programs, and that research on the effects and their policy implications was lagging. This study, by an 11-man committee of population specialists chaired by Roger Revelle, was an outgrowth of that expression of concern. The committee's report constitutes a self-contained, 100-page unit within this book and has been issued separately in paperback. A collection of 17 invited papers appears only in this edition.

The report begins with the observation that "the belief is widespread that uncontrolled population growth in the earth's poor countries is leading to catastrophe. It is possible, however, to take . . . a view that social inventions will lead to a deliberate limitation of fertility by individual couples." A forthright evaluative statement follows: "high fertility and rapid population growth have seriously adverse social and economic effects. A reduction in human fertility is an important component of social and economic development. . . ."

The ensuing endorsement of family planning in less-developed countries is embodied, among other places, in a chauvinistic section of one of the committee recommendations: "By virtue of its leadership in population research and its commitment to the enhancement of the lot of the poor of the world, the United States of America is in a unique position to provide continuing support on a long-term and unequivocal basis to help other countries and international agencies carry out voluntary fertility-limiting programs."

Had the committee judged rapid growth to be beneficial, its recommendations calling for more research and for close monitoring of demographic trends, population-influencing policies, and policy-implementing programs could stand. Indeed, its endorsement of "real freedom of choice of family size" on the part of individuals could stand. Its proposal that the having of smaller families be encouraged could be justified in terms of "benefits to individual families" alone. But in framing recommendations the committee members eschew the issue of the rate of population growth as such. Their sentiment that decreases in current rates are desirable is clear, but they equivocate as to why this is so. "The weight of evidence and rational presumption concerning socioeconomic consequences strongly favors a birth rate of 25 or less over one of 35 or higher. It is unquestionably desirable for the welfare of children and mothers to reduce the number of children ever born in the average family to a much lower level than the range of six or more that now exists in many countries."

Confounding family size and the growth rate is a disservice on the part of population specialists. Does the committee recommend slower growth, which may entail reductions in average family size, or a smaller family size, which may result in slackening growth? Blurring of the distinction is scientifically unsound and may actually obscure policy alternatives.

Among the invited papers is "The economics of population control," by Paul Demeny (which also appears in the proceedings of the 1969 General Conference of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population). In some 20 pages Demeny gives a cogent statement of the problem, a collation of economic arguments for and against lowered fertility, a critical assessment of the "economic case for an active policy aimed at *inducing* such a decline," an indication of research priorities and fruitful theoretical perspectives, and a reasoned review of policy implications. Although the paper deals only with economic considerations and reflects the views of only one population specialist, it is both more informative and more provocative than the committee report.

Demeny concludes that "if a decline [in fertility] does take place *spontaneously*, its occurrence should be welcomed on economic grounds." Were it the case that "the actions of individual families with respect to fertility do not affect others," then: "(a) Families should be permitted to act in their best interest as they see it in setting the level of their fertility, and society should extend help to render that freedom effective. (b) Society as a whole should accommodate itself to the sum total of these individual decisions as best it can." This is not the case, but "the guidance economists are at present able to give for policy makers on such matters [as the appropriate form of governmental intervention] is less than solid." In Demeny's view "the most plausible economic argument on which a first step beyond family planning, understood in a narrow sense, can be made" in today's less-developed countries is that "once a social choice for modernization has been made, fertility reduction has to come sooner or later. It seems most likely that a fertility decline brought about within a voluntary framework but making use of a carefully engineered set of pressures and inducements would turn out to be less painful than decline under a process of later 'natural' demographic adjustment, typically elicited by acute economic distress."

It is unfortunate that the committee report rather than a selection of invited papers has been issued as a separate. Although they bear less directly on the consequences and policy implications of rapid population growth than does the Demeny paper, the essays by Myron Weiner on the political consequences of population change, Abdel Omran on the role of abortion in reducing fertility, and Harvey Leibenstein on the impact of population growth on those acquired characteristics of population that are important to output and its growth are challenging.

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Racial Views

White Attitudes toward Black People. ANGUS CAMPBELL. Institute for Social Research, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1971. viii, 178 pp., illus. Cloth, $8; paper, $5.

There is an acute national need for systematic, longitudinal public opinion data on such major concerns as race relations. Despite all the talk about "social indicators" and "relevant" research, we still must depend upon haphazardly timed surveys conducted with varying objectives and methods in order to estimate trends in American opinions. This little volume by the director of the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research illustrates both the promise of survey research and the severe limitations of present arrangements.