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Let Them Eat Cake

At the second United Nations conference on population, convened in August in Mexico City, the prestige and power and ostensibly the know-how of the United States went to advise the developing countries to let the play of supply and demand in the free market solve their economic and population problems. Population increase, our representatives declared, is not of itself a bad thing, and it sets up increase in demand. On the supply side, they argued, intervention by the state must not be allowed to inhibit the response of sufficiently motivated entrepreneurs.

This advice, not endorsed by the delegations of other market economies, carries the faults inherent in prescription from narrow ideology. It is not supported by the history of the industrial revolution nor by present arrangements in the societies that enjoy its benefits. In its practical import, it invites the industrial nations to renege on their unredeemed pledge, twice declared in unanimous votes in the U.N. Assembly, to help hasten the development of the preindustrial nations by providing substantial economic and technical assistance.

The ultimate size of the world population will be determined by the time it takes the poor countries of the world to complete the demographic transition: that is, the transition from near zero population growth at high death rates and high birth rates to near zero population growth at low death rates and birth rates. The people of Europe, at home and in the lands they settled around the world, made that transition in about 400 years. Until the 17th century, they had the same 25-year life expectancy as the rest of the world population. Over the years in which they carried through their scientific-industrial revolution, they multiplied their numbers 20 times. Enjoying at last the physical well-being that ensures the survival of their infants, they have brought their birth rates down to the low level of their death rates that gives them life expectancies in excess of 70 years.

The rest of the world population has meanwhile multiplied its numbers about ten times. With their death rates falling as they come through the first phase of the demographic transition, that ten times will double to 20 times in the next 30 years. Much less than a century remains to see the world population stabilize at a technologically, politically, and morally tolerable number.

The rate and scale of economic development required to secure the necessary popularization of physical well-being exceed by many times what can be expected or hoped for from the market process. Ahead of the developing countries still remains the immense task of putting in place the infrastructure of industrialization. In the United States—and they know this as well as we—it is a long time since the building of turnpikes was left to private enterprise. Our railroads are nationalized in fact if not in name. The building of the great dams and water distribution systems that sustain agriculture west of the 100th meridian is a sanctioned federal enterprise. With money earning double-digit interest, our smokestack industries quit investing in plants a decade ago. The two U.S. industries that earn foreign exchange—aircraft and electronics—enter into the domestic and world markets with the cutting edge of their technologies secured by subsidy by the purchasing power of the federal government, especially that of the Department of Defense.

For some substantial number of the world's poor, the United States still holds out the future to which they aspire. What they require from us is not advice—and surely not advice carrying the mindless condescension Marie Antoinette offered to the poor of Paris—but action alongside them in the task of hastening their economic development. Belonging to the same world population, we have as large a stake in the outcome as they do.—GERARD PIEL, *President-Elect, AAAS, and Chairman of the Board, Scientific American, Inc., New York 10017*