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Book Review
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June 2009

Population Control: Real Costs, Illusory Benefits

**Steven W. Mosher; New Brunswick; Transaction Publishers; 2009; 300 pages;
£19.95 pbk; ISBN 978-1-4128-0712-8**

Steve Mosher has written a powerful and insightful book on one of the major issues of the twenty first century: the obsession with population growth and the powerful mechanisms put in place to control it. Divided into three main parts, the thesis of the book is as follows: the idea of overpopulation is false dogma because it attributes population growth to the wrong cause, mainly, the rise in births. Life expectancy at birth is steadily rising and we stopped dying like flies because of overall improvement in the quality of life. However, while demographic implosion and transition in the West has followed its natural course, developed countries such as the United States are now pressuring less developed countries to regulate population growth. One of the consequences of this foreign policy and advocacy is increase in the size of government in developing nations seeking to regulate sexuality and the reproductive life of the citizens. Women disproportionately bear the costs of enforced population control measures and foreign aid is diverted from research on malaria, the number one killer in Africa, to serve short-sighted policies that cause more harm than good. Another unintentional consequence of heavy handed policies funded by U.S. dollars is the overemphasis of the sexual transmission framework to fighting AIDS in Africa when other studies show poor sanitation and clinical care – some of it implemented by U.S. funded agencies – as powerful vectors of HIV/AIDS disease. Moreover, the fear of population growth reinforces technocratic paternalism that puts family fertility at the mercy of states' desires. One cannot read the book without thinking at least for a moment about great conspiracy theories that pitch the wealthy against the poor, rich nations against less advanced; pharmaceutical companies, research laboratories and higher education research centres against the disenfranchised of the world. Although Steven Mosher never presents himself as a 'conspirator' or a sympathiser with such views, he unapologetically exposes the real costs and illusory benefits of the population control movement. This thought-provoking book is captivating from beginning to end and the argument presents a major contribution to the understanding of why costly interventions often yield minimum benefits in the domain of population control.

The Cold War ended with the rise of the United States to pre-eminence and the triumph of the view that population control in developing nations is a matter of U.S. national security. Hence, after the 1994 U.N. conference on population development in Cairo, Egypt, population decrease became a major preoccupation in U.S. foreign policy and subsequently a necessary measurement of economic development and political stability in the Third World. What is puzzling about the timing of the rise of the population control movement is, Mosher writes, the fact that for those who "listen closely" everywhere around the world, they heard "the muffled sound of population crashing" (p.5). From Japan to Germany, from New Zealand to Latin America, people are still loving but not procreating. Mosher observes, "The Mexican family now numbers no more children than its American counterpart" (p.12) and education has provided more options to women than marriage.

If actual population fluctuations are less cynical, how do we explain what the author calls the "overpopulation propaganda"? At least two answers are provided. The first has to do with anxiety caused by "white pestilence," a term that refers to the existing low fertility rate and aging within white populations having to interact with immigrant groups known for their high fertility rate. The second explanation is the power of ideology in organising and institutionalising interest among different advocacy groups. One example of the interconnectedness between ideology and institutional interest

is the long-held assumption that AIDS in Africa was a heterosexual epidemic. This assumption, the author contends, is informed by old clichés about African men more likely to have many sex partners than men from other racial groups. The 'heterosexualisation' of African AIDS therefore allowed strategic alliances between population controllers and health advocates convince that sexual transmission is the intrinsic mode of transmission of the HIV virus in Africa. With convincing data and charts, Mosher demonstrates how non-sexual HIV transmission may in fact be higher in Africa due to the poor quality of clinical and reproductive care. Population controllers set up clinics in Africa and encourage abortion in the name of women's rights to choose. However, while in the United States manual vacuum aspirators (MVAs) are designed for single use, in Africa, they are given to poor women with permission to reuse. This double standard between regions with regard to basic safety practices leads the author to contemplate other motivations and the cost of policies that seem inefficient in fighting AIDS and other opportunistic diseases around the world.

Overall, the book raises fundamental questions that leave no one untouched. It is a call to self-critique, not necessarily a summary of best practices and magical answers. In fact, the only disappointing part of the book is the last chapter in which the author proposes a way out of the population control frenzy. In this last section, the author's attention is entirely focused on Western programs to solve the aging and low fertility rate issues. Researchers preoccupied with the Third World where the population pressure seems higher will not learn a lot from the book in terms of real solutions to the inducement to control the growth of the multitude. Moreover, although the author writes about the Third World, he never gives it a voice either. Because the domination framework that inspires the whole project is taken for granted, the agential power of the less developed countries is weakens chapters after chapters before it vanishes completely in the conclusion. Judging the book by its intent and content, *Population Control* is contributing to the debate about the role of demographics in politics and military strategy in the twenty first century by raising important questions that force us to reconsider among other things, costly ideological frameworks with illusory returns in U.S. foreign policy. Content-wise, the book is easy to read with great appendixes on contraceptive shipments around the world.