

POPULATION DECISIONS AND PERSONAL DESIRES

RODOLFO A. BULATAO

In the twenty minutes I have, I would like to present a set of arguments in rather academic fashion. It is common these days to be ashamed of being academic rather than being "relevant." I am not sure, however, that I want to apologize. Most of us are academic at some point in our lives, and it serves a useful purpose. It gives us a chance to investigate various possibilities, to look over options without being prematurely committed to them, to experiment before we are sure what we really want, before we have to make a firm decision. It is in this spirit of elucidating options that I wish to make my argument this evening.

When I end, I think, at least some of you may be glad that this is academic rather than practical, that this is still at the level of ideas and possibilities. And you may be able to sleep better at night — or whatever else it is you do at night — knowing that Big Brother is not (yet) watching.

Let us begin with family planning. In theory, family planning is a voluntary measure to enable couples to have only the children they want, and no more. Couples are not forced to use any particular contraceptive method but encouraged to choose the method they prefer. Neither is anyone else supposed to tell them how many children to have: that is their own free choice. As Presidential Decree No. 79, Section 45 says, the objective is "to encourage all persons to adopt safe and effective means of planning and realizing desired family size," implying that the desires to be realized are those of the couples themselves.

We have to ask, then, how many children people actually want. According to the 1973 National Demographic Survey, married women between 15 and 45 want an average of 4.5 children. Is this good or bad? It is less than the

number of children people actually have. The total fertility rate from the same survey for the period 1968-72 is 5.9, which means that the average woman who passed through her years of potential motherhood experiencing the 1968-72 fertility of women at all ages would end up with 5.9 children, or about 30 percent more than she desired. It is these one-and-a-half "extra" children per couple that the family planning program tries to get couples to leave out.

The number of extra births is actually larger than this: for instance, some couples are unable to reach their desired numbers. In some recent tabulations from the same survey for which I should thank Peter Smith, it was estimated that 32 percent of all births between 1968 and 1972 were unwanted, in the sense that they added up to more children than the woman desired. If these births had not taken place, the annual crude birth rate for these years would have been not 41.8 as indicated by the survey but 28.5 per thousand. This would have been a substantial reduction. If such a reduction were achieved in the next year, present targets for the reduction of population growth would be exceeded. Such a reduction, however, would require utopian conditions: a perfect family planning program, one that reached every single couple, convinced every one of them to plan their family, and enabled them to do so with perfect success. Women would have to translate their verbal preferences into actions, their husbands would have to cooperate, and they would have to choose foolproof or perhaps, I should say, womanproof and manproof methods. Everyone knows that our population program is not perfect, neither a perfect success nor a perfect failure. How much time do we have to achieve perfection, and in

the process lower the birth rate to 28.5 per thousand? (I am not, let me be clear, referring to 28.5 as perfection, because it is still well above replacement level, but is the best, in present circumstances, that a perfect program could do.)

The Commission on Population has set as one target the reduction of the birth rate from what was estimated as 43.2 in 1970 to 35.9 in 1977. Targets beyond this date have not been set. If we take this reduction, however, which is a drop of 7.3 per thousand in seven years, and assume a similar projected reduction in the following seven years, then the target for 1984 would be 28.6. By the logic of present trends, therefore, the goal for 1984 — which is only nine years away — is a perfect family planning program. And after 1984 — on the assumption we reach this goal — no matter what additional funds, technical assistance, foreign grants, or new technologies are available, no further reduction will be possible, unless — and this the point of the argument — the number of children people want declines.

Those of us who are skeptical about perfection, particularly in government, may in fact be well advised to worry about changes in family-size preferences well before 1984. Changing attitudes or changing desires is a complex, lengthy process, involving restructuring not only the individual's mind-set but also the social realities he normally responds to. A student starting in population education in the elementary grades this year will still be in high school and not through with the entire course by 1984, and not yet in a position to make his desires for children felt in the baby market. There are in fact present attempts to change family-size desires, not only through population education but also through various forms of propaganda, manipulation of the income tax and maternity benefits, and similar methods. It is official policy, in fact, to attempt "to internalize, among the citizens, the desire for a smaller family size" (National Economic and Development Authority 1973: 344-345). It is also likely that desires will change by themselves, even if nothing is consciously done to

change them. In fact, between 1968 and 1973 median number of children desired appears to have gone down by one-half a child (Family Planning Evaluation Office 1973).

Let us consider the ways in which the desire for children may decline, without distinguishing between "natural" processes and processes that are set in motion by government intervention. There are three basic ways for desires to change: (1) persuasion, (2) changing the facts on which the desires are based, and (3) coercion. Under persuasion I mean to include anti-natalist propaganda, population education, peer-group pressure, and all such personal or impersonal means of influence. Persuasion is an attempt to change the reasons behind an attitude or desire, and therefore the attitude itself. Reasons may change in several ways. People may become more aware of arguments on either side, even though the facts underlying these arguments have not changed. Or new arguments they were not previously aware of may be introduced, such as the idea that their actions may have deleterious societal consequences. If in rethinking his desires the individual concludes that reducing the number he wants would be in his own interests, then persuasion has led to a gain for all. If, on the other hand, the individual is persuaded to give up individual interests for the national interests, he pays a penalty unless his share of the gain in the national interest is at least equal to the individual interest he gives up. It is very difficult to tell how rational individual desires are in regard to the calculation of gains and losses, psychic and economic, incurred from having children. We do now know, therefore, if persuasion is leading toward rationalizing desires or toward introducing an element of self-sacrifice into them.

To turn to the second way desires are altered, this has to do essentially with changing the balance of satisfactions and cost — economic, psychological, and social — connected with children. These satisfactions and costs change of themselves as a society develops. They are different in urban and in rural settings, different for the more educated and the less edu-

cated. The balance favors more children in rural areas and more children for the poor, who depend on children economically and for security in their old age. The balance can also be affected by government action, through such measures as revisions in maternity benefits.

Finally there is coercion, for which I would emphasize not physical but legal coercion, the requirement, say, that everyone have no more than a certain number of children, or that only those in certain age groups have children, or that different people have precise numbers of children, or some requirement of that type.

The variety of possible specific measures under each heading is large and expandable, and additional ones may be invented. It is not possible to discuss all the intricacies here, but some general points about these three classes of measures should be made. Each of them may entail some sacrifice from parents who reduce their family-size desires. Those who change because of persuasion give up some personal benefits for social benefits, of which they do not necessarily receive a proportionate share. Those who change because of the increased costs or reduced benefits of children may lose a source of additional income, security, or pleasure because they can no longer afford it. And those who change because of straightforward coercion lose because they are not compensated for the children they will not have. No method is costless to the individual (with the exception of persuasion based on rational self-interests), not even the natural reduction in fertility desires that accompanies socio-economic development. A more useful question may be how the costs are distributed among different couples.

Another cost of these measures, a frequently emphasized one, is the loss of some degree of personal freedom. It is inappropriate to draw a sharp line between the first two types of measures and the third in regard to freedom. The reproductive process, to begin with, does not involve complete freedom of choice. Various cultural or religious restrictions, personal fears, social pressures, and limitations of contraceptive technology affect reproductive

choice and make it only theoretically free. Apart from this general point, both persuasion and alterations in the utility of children involve some degree of external control, some modification of the economic, psychological, cognitive, or social context of the couple's decision. If you change the conditions under which a decision is made, you influence the decision, so that these apparently non-coercive measures, one lawyer argues, take on "an aura of manipulation not unlike that of more explicitly coercive proposals" (Harvard Law Review 84: 1972).

But is it really necessary to worry about freedom? Is freedom the major consideration that ethicists say it is? This is an interesting question, and one that is difficult to investigate directly. Many of our sentiments about freedom come out of the works of political liberators, whose propaganda and dedication to freedom have become not just watchwords but clichés. Do people really care about freedom, particularly in relation to fertility decisions?

In 1973 we did a small study of about 280 adults that may give some indicative answers (Bulatao 1974), though the sample was so small that I advance these findings with caution. Here is one question from that survey: "Supposing the government were to decide that every newly married couple could have only two children and no more. Would you be in favor of this or not?" Seventy-one percent were in favor of such a measure, 21 percent were against, and the rest gave qualified answers. Here is another question: "In the same situation [if the government determined that the population was growing too fast and there were not enough jobs for adults, not enough schools for children, not enough hospitals for everyone, and not enough money to pay for these things], if you had no children yet and it were a serious national emergency, would you be willing to stop at two children if the government said everybody had to stop at two?" Fifty-three percent were very willing to stop at two, 31 percent were moderately willing, 12 percent were slightly willing, and only 4 percent not willing at all. It looks, from these two questions, that the sample we studied was generally willing to go along with

government strictures, that they would not stick on little issues like personal freedom.

There is another indication of this unconcern with freedom in the study. Out of a set of attitude items we developed an index of the degree to which the individual was concerned about following his conscience, as opposed to following the law whatever the law might be. We reasoned that individuals concerned about personal responsibility would be those most interested in freedom from oppressive law, and therefore also those who would reject any coercion in their fertility desires. However, those concerned with freedom were no more likely to oppose such coercive measures as the two previous examples. This apparently indicates that freedom was not an important consideration in fertility control, at least given the belief in a population emergency. There was, finally, strong agreement among our respondents on the need for law in society, to guarantee order and social stability and to ensure the decencies in peoples' lives. While this may be interpreted several ways, it is consistent with the idea that personal freedom is far from a burning social concern.

One other implication can be drawn from these results. While personal freedom was not a central concern, social equity, of which we have heard several times in this series, was. We asked our respondents what they thought of other measures to reduce family-size desires, such as a pension for parents with two or fewer children or free education if the family had only two children, measures that operate through changing the utility of children. Although these measures did receive slight favorable majorities, approval was not as strong as for a simple limitation on births. These measures operate through market mechanisms, allowing, in a sense, for greater freedom, but are more likely to be iniquitous, since the rich will always be able to disregard small changes in the utility of children and go ahead and "buy" all they want. A simple limitation, on the other hand, is much more unambiguous and equitable. Many people prefer rationing to higher costs, because rationing can in theory treat everyone

alike and does not increase out-of-pocket expenses, and this may be true whether we speak of gasoline or of babies. Since a system of limitation or rationing is to some extent coercive, these respondents appeared to be choosing equity over freedom.

Let us then review the argument and see where it has led us. I argued that unwanted pregnancies were frequent and the family planning program could in theory have much greater effect. But as perfection is not possible (in this country?) — or, if perfection were achieved, its gains would soon run out — we have to begin to think of how to reduce the number of children that couples desire. This attitude which would involve some cost to couples. In comparing the possible ways to bring about the change, we should lay stress, as a small survey indicates, not on freedom, which is less of an issue for ordinary couples, but on equity. Methods like persuasion or changing benefits and costs would slightly favor — but not guarantee — freedom. More coercive methods could favor equity. It may be the latter that people prefer.

What then of personal freedom in the brave new world of these speculations? Shall we conclude, with Robert Heilbroner and others, that the authoritarian government is the wave of the future, the only type of government that can effectively reduce family size and deal with the massive ramifications of interrelated social problems, the government that can provide at least the picture if not some of the substance of greater equity? Are authoritarianism and coercion the only cure for such a national emergency as population growth? A national emergency rallies people, makes them willing to give up things — freedom among others. Perhaps the freedom to have the babies one wants may come to be regarded, as Heilbroner (1974) has said of the intellectual freedom that may be what allows us to have this discourse today, "with much the same mixed feelings as we hold with respect to the ways of a vanished aristocracy — a way of life no doubt agreeable to the few who benefited from it, but of no concern, or even of actual disservice, to the vast majority."

Note

At the time he read this paper, Rodolfo A. Bulatao was assistant professor, Department of Sociology, University of the Philippines System.

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